



*Dorothy*  
Orlan Orphans, Book 7

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

KIRSTEN  
OSBOURNE

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# Dorothy

Orlan Orphans Book 7

# Kirsten Osbourne



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## Introduction

Dorothy Sanders absolutely adores her life in Nowhere, Texas with her sisters and their devoted, eccentric adoptive parents. When she is hired by a young lawyer to do his bookkeeping, she is immediately drawn to his sharp intellect and good looks.

Carter Reeves simply wanted a girl to help out with his filing for the summer. He wasn't looking for love, and he certainly wasn't expecting it in such a wholesome young woman like Dorothy. He intends to marry her and bring her back to the city with him, but Dorothy never wants to leave. Will they find a way to be together? Or will Carter leave after the summer is over and never look back?

## Chapter 1

**D**orothy Sanders swirled her skirts as she turned onto Main Street, feeling hopeful. She was on her way to an interview for a real paying job. Ever since she had moved to Nowhere, Texas, she had only helped her adoptive parents, Edna Petunia and Cletus Sanders, around the house.

Though Dorothy had been born in New York, she had been in Nowhere for nearly five years, and now it was home. She had been raised in an orphanage, until she, along with fourteen other girls, had been sent away with their matron to live in Texas. Some of her “sisters” had taken a while to get adjusted to life in the country, but Dorothy had quickly fallen in love with the slower pace of Texas.

She passed by the mercantile owned by Lewis, her older sister Ruby’s husband. She saw Ruby inside tending to some wooden crates, and waved. Ruby smiled back, and Dorothy could see Robert and James, Ruby’s stepsons, chasing her toddler, Jasper, around the store. They were sweet boys, but rambunctious, and Dorothy knew her sister had her hands full. Her first set of twins, Crystal and Jade, were sitting quietly playing with their baby dolls. She wondered briefly where her sister’s younger twin daughters were. Hopefully they were napping in the back room.

Seeing Ruby and many of her other sisters get married made Dorothy wonder if she would ever find love. She treated everyone with kindness and respect, and that meant she had many friends across town. But there was no one that lit a fire within her. No one who made her feel the way she read about in books or saw in her sisters when they’d settled down. Dorothy wanted to show her family that even if she hadn’t found love like her sisters had, she was still able to lead an interesting life.

The house came into view, and Dorothy hoped Mr. Reeves wouldn’t be too boring. When she saw the advertisement he’d posted in the local newspaper, it had seemed too good to be true—a part-time secretary needed for the summer to assist a lawyer from Austin. He would be staying in Nowhere for a few months, gathering evidence for



an upcoming court appearance. From the letter he had written when she'd applied for the position, he seemed very formal and stuffy. Dorothy guessed he was about Cletus's age. Her adoptive father was in his early seventies, but still full of life. She hoped Mr. Reeves would be, too.

Dorothy knocked on the door and felt some nervousness in the pit of her stomach. There was no answer. The house seemed large and imposing, full of dark corners and in a state of disrepair. Dorothy worried for a moment that it was abandoned, but then she noticed a buggy parked near the house. She peered at it a bit closer. The carriage looked almost new.

Suddenly, the door flew open. "You must be the girl."

"I'm looking for Mr. Reeves?" Dorothy took a step back as she stared into the eyes of a young, handsome man dressed in a fancy black suit. He was closer to her age than anything—far too young to be a lawyer.

"You can start with the correspondence," the man said, barely glancing at her as he stepped aside, gesturing for her to come in. She followed him through the dimly-lit house, nearly tripping over the piles of boxes scattered across the floor.

When they got to a small, cramped study, the man pointed to a chair next to a wood desk.

"The first letter should be addressed to the Austin Court of Appeals, to the Honorable John Mason—"

"Excuse me?"

"Miss Sanders, as I wrote in my ad, I have a great deal of work to be done this summer. You'll need to go at my pace if this is going to work out. Do you understand?"

Dorothy swallowed hard and steeled herself for what was next. She found a pen on the desk, dipped it in the inkwell, and placed a blank sheet of paper in front of her.

"Yes, sir." Dorothy wrote as fast as she could as Carter dictated. She couldn't believe that this strong young man was the stuffy Carter Reeves, Esquire.

Carter watched as Dorothy neatly dotted each 'i' and crossed each 't.' He liked that she hadn't complained once. It was a promising sign. When she'd responded to his ad, he had pictured a matronly older woman. Dorothy was not only youthful, but also had a fresh-faced, innocent look that made Carter feel like he'd known her his entire life.

"We'll begin at eight o'clock sharp each morning. You'll have an hour for lunch midday, but I'd prefer you eat here, because it will save time. Then we'll work until four o'clock each afternoon. Is that understood?"

Dorothy's hand was cramping badly, and words were swimming in

front of her eyes from the dim light. She refused to let him get the best of her, though.

“Yes, sir.”

Two hours passed before Dorothy allowed herself to look at the clock. She was starting to get used to the bossy tone in which Carter was dictating his letters. For a lawyer, he sure wrote a lot of letters.

“I need to show you something, Miss Sanders.”

Dorothy stood up, stretching out her legs and arms. Her muscles were already groaning in pain. Carter marched out the front door, holding it open behind him as he waited for her to catch up.

Carter helped Dorothy into his buggy and unhitched his horses from the post. He flicked the lines, and they pulled onto the road toward town. Soon, they passed the church, where Dorothy spotted her brother-in-law, Micah Barton, entering the small building. Dorothy called out to Micah and he waved back in response.

“That’s Sarah Jane’s husband. She’s my sister.”

“I see.” Carter seemed distracted, and Dorothy was content to sit back and enjoy the sweltering summer day. She wondered where they were going, but decided to wait until Carter told her. He seemed like a man that did not like to waste his words. She would have to earn them, and that was just fine with her.

“Hi, Dorothy!” She heard a shout from the street and saw that it was Evelyn’s son, playing outside in front of the mercantile. Evelyn was standing in front of the mercantile, a shopping basket hanging over one arm.

“That’s my sister Evelyn and her son.” Dorothy wasn’t sure why she was explaining all of this to Carter, but she felt like he should start to get to know her if they were going to spend so many hours together at work.

Carter turned the buggy on one of the roads leading out of town, and they approached the direction of Bagley, one of the small towns in the surrounding area of Nowhere. Dorothy was surprised when the McClain Ranch, with its gorgeous house and row of five cozy cabins, came into sight. She made out a woman hanging laundry on a clothesline and excitedly waved to her.

“That’s my sister, Penny! She and her husband, Tom, live here with their sons. She’s got one on the way, too.”

Carter didn’t say anything for a minute, but Dorothy could see the sides of his face pull up in a smirk.

Penny waved back, and sure enough, a stream of boys running, laughing, and jostling each other tore out of the cabin and across the fields, nearly knocking down their mother and her laundry sack. Tom, the youngest son of seven sons, had grown up in the large house, and now his wife and their growing brood lived on the property as well.

“How many sisters do you have, exactly?”

“Fourteen in all.” Dorothy didn’t have to look at Carter to know that his face wore a shocked expression.

“That seems...unusual.”

“We all grew up in an orphanage in New York, but then the church decided that girls and boys shouldn’t be kept under the same roof. We all came on a bus to Nowhere, and now this is our home. I feel very lucky, because we were adopted by a wonderful couple, Edna Petunia and Cletus Sanders.”

“Ah...yes, Cletus Sanders. The name is familiar to me. I believe we sat for the same exams when we were getting our law degrees. I didn’t realize you were related.”

“Yes, he is wonderful. We are all very grateful to Cletus and Edna. And Edna always wanted a house full of bastards—”

“Excuse me?”

“Sorry, that’s her term for us. I suppose I should mind my manners.” Dorothy giggled, putting a hand to her mouth. She didn’t know what it was, but something about Carter made her want to tell him everything.

“That’s perfectly all right, Miss Sanders. I think you’ll learn that I’m a straight shooter. I say what I mean and I mean what I say.”

“Do you have any siblings?”

“No.”

Dorothy felt sad to think of Carter growing up by himself, without the easy camaraderie she’d always shared with most of her sisters. Then again, Dorothy had never known any other way. For as long as she could remember, she had lived in the orphanage, and there had always been a steady stream of other children around.

Carter drove them further and further from the McClain ranch, and even past the town of Bagley. Finally, Dorothy had to ask.

“Where are we going, sir?”

“We’re going to an estate that’s at the center of a dispute. The previous owner passed away, which makes it seem as if the property should go to a distant cousin. Only problem is the man actually did have a son, Mr. Parrish, who’s my client.”

“Why didn’t Mr. Parrish’s father leave the property to him? Did they have a falling out?”

“Not really. My client was raised by his mother, and the farmer—Mr. Drake—was never aware he had a son. However, Texas law states that a nearer blood relative can claim property...so now the cousin and Mr. Parrish are involved in a dispute over the land.”

“How much land is it?” Dorothy asked as she stared at the land.

“It’s over three hundred acres.”

“Wow!” Dorothy couldn’t contain her shock. She was still getting

used to measuring things in acres instead of miles, but three hundred was a large parcel of land.

“Yes. Mr. Parrish is very interested in resolving the dispute so he can begin farming on the land.”

“How will the court resolve it?”

“That’s a complicated question. My work here is to find the facts, the evidence. To see if Mr. Drake ever knew that his son existed. And to do that, we need to visit Mr. Drake’s home and review some of his files.”

Carter stopped the horses as they pulled up to a small, ramshackle home at the edge of the property. He helped Dorothy down from the buggy and tied the horses to a battered post that leaned toward the ground.

Dorothy wasn’t sure why it was called an estate. The house looked like it was barely standing up.

As soon as they entered the house, Dorothy saw their work was cut out for them. The floor of the entire house was covered in papers, books, pots and pans, silverware. A feral cat lazily made its way through the mess. It looked like someone had ransacked the place.

“Unbelievable.” Carter wore a look of disgust on his face. “This place is a pig sty. It’s no wonder—living all the way out here in the country.”

“I think it’s nice out here. My sister and her husband and the boys, they love all the wide-open space, and—”

“I don’t care for it *at all*!”

Dorothy was determined not to let anything rattle her on her first day of work. She found herself wanting to impress Carter and was surprised at how much she already cared about what he thought of her.

“I’ll start by picking up all the papers. I’ll put them in piles, arranged by date.”

Dorothy busied herself with the papers and set aside scraps of paper and bits of food that seemed like waste. It wasn’t the most thrilling job, but it was better than transcribing Carter’s correspondence. For the first time all day, her employer seemed speechless.

After an hour, Carter looked at his pocket watch and motioned for Dorothy to stop. She tidied up the areas she had been working on.

“That’s enough for today. We’ll go back to the house for lunch and this afternoon’s work.”

Dorothy nodded and followed Mr. Reeves back outside of the house to the buggy. After he unhitched the horses, he tried to wipe the excess dirt off his hands as he grumbled to himself.

“I’ll never understand how people live out here year-round. It’s

filthy.”

Dorothy felt her face grow red. She had just been thinking about what a lovely day it was, and how glad she was that she would be getting fresh air on the way back. But she chose not to respond to Carter. After all, Nowhere did tend to grow on you. Not everyone adapted easily. But she found herself hoping, for some reason, that he would.

## Chapter 2

When Dorothy returned home at the end of the day, she was

exhausted. Most of the unmarried girls gathered around the dinner table, as was their custom, but Dorothy wasn't her usual talkative self. She stayed quiet as she ate her roasted chicken and rice.

"What's wrong?" Concern filled Edna Petunia's eyes. Although she hadn't been the girls' mother as they were growing up, she had come to understand them, and knew when something was off.

"I think I'm just overwhelmed by how much work there is to do. Mr. Reeves is due in court in less than two months, and there's so much to do at the house."

"I thought you were a secretary." Theresa cut straight to the point, as usual.

"Well, I do a little bit of whatever Carter—er, Mr. Reeves, needs." She blushed, knowing that she shouldn't have spoken of her employer so familiarly.

Edna Petunia smiled knowingly when she saw Dorothy's face. She had a glint in her eyes that Cletus recognized.

"Now, Edna Petunia, don't go getting any ideas now. Dorothy's just working for him for the summer, you know," Cletus chided gently.

"What is it?" Dorothy was too exhausted to understand what was going on.

"I heard from Penny that this Carter is quite the good-looking young man." Edna Petunia watched Dorothy carefully for a reaction. The other girls stopped giggling and gossiping to listen to their mother. Now they were interested, too.

"Quite the eligible young bachelor. You know it's my dream to plan a wedding for at least *one* of you girls."

It was a sore point in the family that all of Dorothy's sisters had, for one reason or another, married their husbands quickly and with little to no preparation, thus robbing Edna Petunia of her mother-of-the-bride expectations.

"That's ridiculous. I work for the man. There are no wedding bells in our future. *That's* for certain."

“But is he really as handsome as they say he is?”

Dorothy thought carefully before she spoke. “Well, I suppose he’s all right. But I’m a professional woman now. I can’t go losing my head just because he’s not ugly.”

Cletus smiled proudly at his daughter. He was glad she had a good head on her shoulders. Since she was prone to storytelling and reading adventurous tales, he’d always worried that she may have her head too far up in the clouds to ever really be satisfied with her life. But the girl in front of him was a mature, confident young woman. She would do well, no matter what she pursued in her life.

“Plus, he’s rather rude,” Dorothy added when her sisters gave her looks that showed they didn’t believe her when she said she wasn’t interested in him.

“Rude? How so?”

“He’s constantly making comments about ‘country life.’ As if his life in Austin was so much better than it is here.”

At this, Edna Petunia and Cletus both bristled, and a few of the girls did as well. Edna and Cletus could have moved anywhere when they’d gotten married, but they’d specifically chosen their country town—and Cletus’s parents’ home—to settle down and raise their family.

“Well, if he gives you any trouble, you tell him that he’ll need to deal with me.” Cletus couldn’t help but feel like an overprotective father whenever he felt one of his girls was threatened. But Dorothy laughed.

“I don’t think that will be necessary, but I’ll let you know if anything changes. Now, what’s for dessert? I think I smell something delicious.” Minnie, one of the sisters who loved making people smile, stood up and brought over a chocolate cake to the table. As Dorothy tasted the fudgy dessert, she thanked her lucky stars that God had brought her and her sisters to the Sanders’.

\* \* \*

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, Dorothy left extra early to make sure she arrived at Carter’s house on time. She was still tired and sore from the day before, but she was even more determined to show Carter that she could handle whatever he dished out.

When she found him in his study, he was still wearing the same suit from the day before, but now it was wrinkled instead of crisp. His eyes were red-rimmed, and he looked as if he hadn’t gotten any sleep.

“Were you working all night?” The words were out of her mouth before she could stop herself.

“That’s none of your concern, Miss Sanders. I’d like you to start with these logs from Mr. Drake’s house. He kept a record of all his visitors from the year 1881 until his death last year. You’re looking for mention of a woman named Louise. That was Mr. Parrish’s mother.”

Dorothy stared at Carter in disbelief. That was nearly three decades! But she bit her lip and took a deep breath.

“Yes, sir.”

Dorothy began to sift through the papers, still a bit wrinkled and messy from their previous disarray, and put them into some semblance of order. She briefly looked over at Carter, sitting in an armchair in the corner, reading through a thick legal book. She saw his eyes flutter shut and reopen a few times. A lock of hair had fallen into his face, and Dorothy suppressed the urge to walk over to him and push it back into place.

“Excuse me, sir?”

Carter blinked and rubbed his eyes. “Yes?”

“Would you like me to make you some coffee?”

“Yes, Miss Sanders. That would be appreciated. Make sure it doesn’t take too much time away from the logs, though. I have a busy afternoon planned.”

Dorothy smiled to herself as she walked into the kitchen to make coffee. The man was obsessed with efficiency and work. She wished they had a little more time for pleasantries. She felt she knew next to nothing about the man she’d be spending so many hours alongside.

That afternoon, Carter told her he needed to visit the town library, so Dorothy showed him the way there. When they entered the small library, Dorothy heard Carter raise his voice for the first time since she’d met him.

“Where’s the rest of it?”

“Shh!” Dorothy’s older sister, Gertrude, the town librarian, hushed them with a stern glare. Dorothy leaned closer to Carter.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, whispering

“This can’t be the only library you have in town. Take me to the *real* library.”

“This *is* the real library.” Dorothy was confused. Sure, the library was small, but what was he expecting? The library’s most popular visitors were school children and elderly people who had nothing better to do. Gertie kept a small collection that usually satisfied anyone who came in. An old man with a long, gray beard looked up from a newspaper he was reading, trying to hear what Carter and Dorothy were talking about.

“I can’t *wait* to get back to the city. I hate it here.”

Gertie marched over to them, an angry look on her face. She wasn’t Dorothy’s favorite sister, but she had a right to be mad. Carter



was causing a fuss in the library.

“How may I help you?” Gertie’s tone was polite but brisk. “I must remind you that there are children in this library.”

“I need the latest legal journal from New York City. Where can I find it?”

“We don’t have any of those. Is there anything else you need?”

Carter let out a sigh of frustration, and his eyes blazed for a second. Dorothy glanced from her sister to her employer nervously.

“How can you call this place a—”

“We’ll be going now. We can send away for a copy of the journal by mail.” Dorothy interrupted Carter, then gently grabbed his arm and steered him out of the library. She knew it might get her in trouble, but she did not want to give Gertie further cause to be mad at her. Gertie was bossy and cranky, and when people upset her, she just acted even bossier and crankier. She was not pleasant to live with under those circumstances.

Outside, Dorothy felt she needed to give Carter a piece of her mind. “Please keep your *opinions* to yourself. I’m sorry that our library didn’t have what you needed, but you have to understand, we’re a small town, and we don’t have all the same resources you do in a big city!”

Carter was upset, but found himself suppressing a smile at Dorothy’s impassioned plea. She was lovely when she was angry, and despite it all, he enjoyed seeing her all riled up. Ordinarily, he would have been furious and unable to concentrate for hours over the issue, but now, he found himself lightening up.

Dorothy wasn’t done yet, though. “Also, that was one of my sisters! I’d appreciate it if you showed some respect to my family.”

Carter laughed, and Dorothy’s face grew even redder. But as he laughed, she felt the corners of her lips start to turn upward, and she wasn’t able to stop herself from bursting into laughter, too. She forgot what she was mad about, and just let herself enjoy the moment.

Carter fought the urge to wrap his arms around Dorothy and pull her in for a kiss. His thought shocked him. He had never been attracted to any of the women he’d worked with before—then again, most of them had been old enough to be his mother! Dorothy was lovely, but he was her employer, and he needed to keep it professional. Still, he wondered more about her life and the seemingly-infinite number of sisters she seemed to have.

He spoke again once the laughter had died down. “I think we’ve gotten off on the wrong foot.”

“I think we have.”

“Instead of complaining about everything, maybe I should have you show me around town. Take me to your favorite places. Show me

what you see in Nowhere. I think that might help me...adjust to the surroundings better. And then I'd be able to focus on my work."

Dorothy shook her head, but she wore a silly grin. This man could not stop talking about work. She was thrilled at the chance to show him around the small town she had grown to call home. There was no way he wouldn't fall in love with it too, once he saw what she saw.

She certainly had her work cut out for her, but it was a job she couldn't wait to start.

Carter cleared his throat. He had gotten a bit carried away, and he needed to get back on track.

"After the work day is done, of course."

"Of course, sir."

The rest of the afternoon passed quickly, as Dorothy thought about all her favorite places while she continued to search the logs for any record of Mr. Parrish's mother. She was so preoccupied in her daydreams that she kept working past four o'clock, until Carter noticed the time and reminded her that he wasn't paying overtime. "I do admire your work ethic, though."

"You never stop talking about work, do you?"

Carter looked puzzled. "Outside of work, what is there to talk about?"

Dorothy laughed out loud. "Just about everything! Family. Food. Places you've never been. Books you're reading. Why, you're the very definition of 'all work and no play'."

"I suppose that's true. But it's important to me to do good work. That's why I became a lawyer. To help people."

"I see. And there's a reason I became your secretary. To help you."

"And I am very grateful for that." Carter stepped closer to Dorothy and took her hand.

A shiver ran down her spine when Carter touched her. She felt nervous and exhilarated at the same time. "I'll be back after supper."

"I'll be waiting."

That evening, Dorothy shoveled her salt pork and beans into her mouth as fast as she could. She barely spoke to her family as they discussed the day's events. Cletus was discussing his plans to run for town judge. He wanted Edna Petunia to sit for a portrait with him. He felt it would help establish his image as a candidate.

"I don't have any desire to be tormented for hours in a hot studio while some failed artist attempts to draw us." Edna Petunia was not afraid to make her positions clear, something Dorothy loved about her adoptive mother. Cletus just grinned. The two were still as in love as they'd been when they'd married, and they never let the girls forget it.

"Oh, snickerdoodle, it won't be that awful. Why, there's an artist traveling through town from Austin! He'd be perfect."

“What is it that makes people from the city think they’re so much better than everyone else?” Dorothy asked, causing everyone to stop eating and stare at her. It was the first thing she’d said all evening.

“Something on your mind, darlin’?” Cletus could always sniff out trouble with his girls.

Dorothy shook her head. “It’s nothing. I need to be excused, though, as I have plans this evening.”

“Where are you going at this hour?” Alice was the most uptight of the sisters. She didn’t approve of fooling around or shenanigans of any sort, and she knew it was odd for Dorothy to have plans in the evening.

“I’m showing Mr. Reeves around town to help him get to know it better. To show him all the things I like about Nowhere.”

Edna Petunia clucked her tongue. “I don’t want to see you getting hurt, dear Dorothy. You’re so generous and loving to everyone. That’s mighty nice of you, but you let us know the instant that boy misbehaves.”

“I will, Edna Petunia. I promise you that.”

Dorothy cleared her plate and put her shoes on. As she rushed out the door, Cletus called out one final warning.

“If it turns out well, just remember...Edna Petunia needs to be able to plan the wedding!”

Dorothy laughed to herself. She knew there was no chance of that happening. At the same time, she found herself hoping it would. There was something special about her new employer—something that made her heart race.

## Chapter 3

When Dorothy arrived at Carter's house, she was pleased to see

he had finally changed out of his rumpled clothes, and now wore a slightly less fancy suit. At least he'd tried to dress more like the locals.

She wore the same dress she'd worn earlier, but she'd taken out her hairpins for the evening, allowing her hair to flow down her back.

"You look lovely."

"Thank you."

"Are you going to tell me where we're going first?" Carter seemed nervous and unsure.

"No...it will be a surprise!" Dorothy grabbed his arm to guide him out the door. Carter turned to put his key into the lock.

"Carter, you can't be serious."

"What? What's wrong?" Carter seemed even more nervous now. Dorothy laughed to put him at ease.

"We're in Nowhere, Texas. No one is going to break into your house. We have almost no crime here. No one locks their doors."

"That can't be true." Carter couldn't imagine that all of the town's residents would be so foolish. "That's too dangerous."

"It's very safe here. It's one of the reasons I love Texas so much. In New York, we were kept safe because our matron watched over us, but our town wasn't the best. I never felt truly safe until I came here and started living with Edna Petunia and Cletus."

Carter frowned. "I suppose, just this once, I could leave the door unlocked."

"Glad to hear it. Now, you follow me. Look straight ahead, don't pay attention to any of the street signs or buildings, all right?"

A few minutes later, Dorothy led Carter into town, her hand on his arm, guiding him gently. "Now close your eyes," she whispered softly.

Carter sighed but followed Dorothy's instructions. "You'd better hope I don't trip, because if I fall, I'm taking you down with me."

"Is that a threat, or a promise?" Dorothy grinned. She didn't care that she was likely flirting with her boss. It was nighttime, and she was about to show Carter one of her favorite spots in the world.

“Okay, now you can open them.” Dorothy watched eagerly as Carter opened his eyes and took in the surroundings. She had taken him to a spot in the back of the mercantile that overlooked a huge meadow. Dorothy had spent many a night sitting with Ruby, Lewis, and their children, talking and laughing after the store was closed for the day. She knew from those nights that the sunset hour was the best time to visit.

She saw that she’d been right in bringing Carter there. His eyes were full of curiosity and light as he watched the sun set over the green pastures.

“This is incredible.” It was the first truly positive thing Dorothy had heard Carter say. She liked hearing it.

“This is just the start. I really do love it here.”

“It’s so...peaceful.”

“Exactly. That’s what I love about Nowhere. People may say it’s a small town and nothing ever happens here, but I disagree. There are plenty of people who keep things interesting around here.”

“It’s great you’ve found a place to call home that you truly enjoy.”

“Are you saying you haven’t found that?” Dorothy was surprised, because every time Carter talked about Austin, it seemed like he thought it was the best place in the world.

Carter paused and looked deep into Dorothy’s eyes. “I love my home in Austin. I could never leave the city. But I’ve never had the experience you’re talking about. Where you feel like a place is home because of the people with you.”

Dorothy’s breath caught in her throat. She wasn’t sure what to say.

“I’m sorry. I’m getting ahead of myself. I’m probably just tired.” Carter mumbled excuses as he walked down a small embankment to get a better view of the meadow. Dorothy was disappointed, but knew better than to say anything. She reminded herself that this man was her employer.

Carter struggled to get a hold of his feelings. He didn’t understand what was happening, but he felt like he was leading Dorothy on. She was such a sweet and wholesome girl—he had no intention of hurting her. Yes, he’d have to keep it professional for the duration of their working relationship. The problem was, he couldn’t keep his eyes off her.

“No, I liked what you were saying before. I think one day, you’ll find someone who makes you want to be in the place they are. And then you’ll see what I mean.”

“Maybe. In the city, unfortunately, I find when I call on women, I don’t care to call on them a second time.”

Dorothy sucked in a breath. She felt pained when she heard Carter talk about other women. Was it *jealousy*? How could she be jealous of

women she'd never met? "Well...what's your ideal woman like? I bet you'll find her."

Carter thought about this a moment as they stood outside, staring off into the distance of the meadow. The sun was setting, and it was getting cooler. Dorothy shivered a bit in her light dress, and Carter slipped off his suit jacket and wrapped it around her shoulders. He stood behind her, holding the jacket in place.

Dorothy felt a fluttery sensation in her stomach and loved feeling Carter's strong arms wrapped around her body. She wished they could stand like that forever.

"I suppose my perfect woman would work in an office, most likely, but she'd stop working when we married so she could keep my home. She'd probably love to go to the theater, and she'd like to read some of the same books and journals that I like. That's about as close as I can imagine." Dorothy listened to Carter give his description with a sinking feeling of despair in the pit of her stomach. He had described a woman that couldn't be further from who she was. Yet he was still holding onto her, keeping her warm...that had to count for something, right?

They stood in silence for a while as the sun continued to retreat. Dorothy could see a few faint lights burning in farmhouses in the distance. Soon, it was almost black, save a few spots in the sky.

"This is my favorite part." Dorothy's tone was hushed as she gazed at the beautiful stars. "I've heard that there are some cities where you can't see the stars, because of the streetlights. Is that true?"

Carter ran his hands up and down Dorothy's arms, sending a tingle down her body. "I suppose in Austin, the street lamps do cause the stars to fade a bit. I've never really noticed. I love street lamps, though. How else do you see what's going on? For example, how are we going to make our way back tonight?"

"I think we'll manage." Dorothy's heart was beating faster and faster by the minute. She'd never had a man's arms around her before, and she was craving more.

"Your turn to answer the question." Carter gently spun Dorothy around so she was facing him.

"What question?"

"Who's your perfect man? What's he like?" Now it was Carter's turn to look uncomfortable. He wanted to know, but he also didn't want to know.

"I have a better idea of how to have this conversation." Dorothy walked toward the back of the mercantile, bent down near a table and some chairs by the back door, and grabbed a large blanket. She came back over to where Carter stood and spread the blanket out, then sat down and patted the ground next to her.

They both laid down on the blanket and looked up at the stars. Dorothy couldn't remember the last time she had been as relaxed, or at peace. She lost her train of thought as she enjoyed her surroundings...and Carter's warm body next to her.

"Hello? Did you forget the question?" Carter found himself anxious to hear what she had to say. It made no sense—but there he was, in the middle of Nowhere, Texas, staring at a pretty girl and waiting for her answer.

"Well, he'd have to love taking long walks, and riding through the countryside, that sort of thing. Family would have to be really important to him. Maybe he has a big family like mine, or maybe it's just a small one, as long as he's close with them. And, most importantly, he'd love being outside in the fresh air."

Carter's heart sank. He'd hoped he'd meet some of Dorothy's criteria for a perfect man, but he was nothing like her ideal. He felt very out of place in the small town she lived in.

Dorothy worried when Carter didn't respond for a while. "You got quiet."

"I'm just thinking about how different we are," Carter finally admitted. Dorothy nodded.

"I know what you mean."

"I wish things were different."

Dorothy turned to look Carter in the eyes. "How so?"

"Well, for example, I wish you'd been born in the city. Or that I'd been born in the country. Maybe if we had been raised in those settings, we'd be more similar."

Dorothy frowned. "Maybe. But if that had been true, we'd never have met at all."

Carter smiled. He hadn't thought of that. He loved the way Dorothy could always look at the bright side of a situation. Her cooler head had already prevailed a few times—like at the library, or at the Drake estate when everything had turned out to be such a mess.

Dorothy enjoyed seeing a different side of Carter. At work he was buttoned up, stiff, and formal. Now he was coming alive, answering her questions candidly and acting interested in her own answers to those questions.

Carter moved his head closer to Dorothy's so their foreheads were practically touching. "It's a shame we're so wrong for each other, isn't it?"

Dorothy felt like she could barely breathe with Carter's face so close to her own. "It is a shame," she agreed.

Carter couldn't stand it any longer. He tilted his head down and kissed Dorothy square on the lips. Dorothy hesitated for a moment, then kissed him back. She'd never been kissed before, so she wasn't

sure what she was doing, but she loved the feeling and wanted more of it. When they were done, Carter rested his head on the ground again. He exhaled loudly.

“With all due respect, Miss Sanders, I don’t think you’ll be finding a country boy who has that effect on you.”

Dorothy couldn’t sleep that night as she replayed her kiss with Carter over and over again. She knew it was wrong to get involved with her employer, but she also couldn’t stop thinking about the man. He was her opposite in almost every way, but something about him made her feel safe and excited. She found herself wanting to learn more about him and his life in Austin. Maybe she would even visit him there one day.

\* \* \*

THE REST of the week passed in a blur of work on the estate case. Most days involved several hours of correspondence—between Carter and his client, Mr. Parrish, Carter and local magistrates, and Carter and his law professors, who still had an interest in helping him succeed. Dorothy marveled at the file of contacts Carter had—it was more people than Dorothy had ever met in her entire life. In the afternoons, they often went out to the Drake estate, cleaning up, reviewing all the documents, and slowly building Carter’s case for Mr. Parrish.

“How do you know Mr. Parrish is the rightful owner?” Dorothy asked one day as they were cleaning.

“To be truthful, I don’t know. But he came to me and told me that his mother had sworn up and down that his father knew he existed, and just didn’t want to be in his life. His father had problems with alcohol, and never cared about anyone or anything but himself. I believed him, Miss Sanders. And I believe it’s the right thing to do to fight for him to get justice.”

Dorothy loved hearing Carter’s passion for doing what was right. It reminded her of Cletus. He was always encouraging the girls to stand up for themselves and do what they believed in.

Dorothy also found her thoughts drifting back to their moonlit kiss. She couldn’t wait to spend time with Carter alone again. She wanted to feel the brush of his lips against hers and his arms around her, engulfing her in his strong frame.

“Miss Sanders! Are you all right?” Dorothy snapped to attention as Carter called her name. She had told him he could call her Dorothy, and he had told her to feel free to call him Carter, but they both stuck to more formal titles most of the time.



“Sorry. I didn’t mean to drift off. I was just...thinking.” Dorothy smiled sweetly, hoping Carter didn’t know exactly what she was talking about. She had a feeling that she liked him a lot more than he liked her, and she didn’t want to seem desperate or pushy. She understood that he was first and foremost her employer, and he would be back to the city in a few weeks. Their time together was wonderful, but fleeting. She would make the most of it, but she wouldn’t beg.

“Less thinking and more filing, please.” Carter’s tone was harsher than he intended. The truth was, he couldn’t stop thinking, either. Thinking about spending more time in the evenings with Dorothy, even though it was inappropriate. He did not want to take advantage of her, and he worried about the things he might do if given the chance. She was pure and wholesome and good, and he found himself wanting to be around her at all times.

Dorothy blinked back a few tears, shocked at how Carter’s words stung her. It was probably more about feeling rejected, since he hadn’t tried to kiss her again since that night outside the mercantile. She wondered if she had done something wrong. Then she refocused her mind on the task at hand. She was filing hundreds of pages of letters and journal entries from Mr. Drake’s home so Carter could reference them later. It was mind-numbing work, but a welcome distraction from her distress over Carter.

“I think...I think I found something new.” Dorothy’s voice was tentative. She couldn’t believe what she was holding in her hands.

Carter’s tone was almost bored, as if he didn’t believe the significance. “What is it?”

“A journal entry dated 1885...for a woman named Louise Parrish! She really did visit!” Dorothy couldn’t contain her excitement. This was the scrap of paper they’d been looking for! It had been stuck to the bottom of another piece, and when she had tried to file it, she realized the pages were stuck together. She carefully peeled them apart and handed the important piece to Carter.

Carter whistled through his teeth. “You, Miss Sanders, are a miracle worker. You may have just won the case for us right there.”

Dorothy noticed that it was well past four o’clock. She stiffened and adopted a more formal tone of voice, remembering Carter’s distance from her over the past few days. “I’ll be going now. You have a good night.”

Carter was taken aback by Dorothy’s shift in tone, but he recovered quickly. “Yes, you too, Miss Sanders. Thank you for your excellent work today. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Dorothy pulled the door shut behind her and leaned against it, breathing heavily. She knew it wasn’t right to have such strong feelings for her employer, but he had a powerful effect on her...and it

seemed like there was nothing she could do about it.

## Chapter 4

**W**hen Dorothy got home, she saw Edna Petunia and Gertie in

the kitchen. It was Gertie's turn to help with dinner. Normally, Dorothy might have confided to Cassie Hayes, the woman who had moved to Texas with the girls as the matron of their former orphanage, about her feelings for Carter, but Cassie was busy with her husband and their growing family.

Dorothy did her best to hide her mood from her family, but she realized quickly she wasn't being successful as everyone gave her pitying glances.

"What's wrong with her?" Gertie was loud and obnoxious. Dorothy's eyes filled with tears.

She didn't feel like explaining to any of her sisters. Several of them were married and wouldn't remember what it was like to be in a new relationship. And the rest of them couldn't understand what she was going through because they had never experienced it.

"Go ahead and put that chicken in the oven, Gertie. I'll be right back." Edna Petunia took off her apron and flew up the steps quick as a flash, following Dorothy into her room.

"What's wrong, sweetheart?"

Dorothy was startled to find Edna Petunia so close behind her. She'd thought she was still in the kitchen making dinner. "I'm fine, Edna Petunia. Thank you."

"You're no more fine than a canary in a coal mine." Edna Petunia had many zany expressions. Dorothy and her sisters weren't always sure what to make of them, but right now, she was touched. Her mother had sensed she wasn't feeling well and was trying to help her feel better.

"Thanks, Edna Petunia. I don't know...I think Carter Reeves has me a bit shaken." With that, the flood gates opened, and Dorothy found herself sobbing into Edna Petunia's chest.

"There, there, sweet thing. Nothing a peppermint stick can't cure." Edna Petunia stuck her hand into her bosom and pulled out a fresh peppermint stick for Dorothy to suck on. Dorothy hesitated, knowing

Edna usually kept these in her cleavage for children she came across, but then accepted, looking at the candy skeptically. Maybe Edna Petunia was right, and the treat would give her fresh breath and peace of mind. She could at least try.

With Edna Petunia's soothing voice and the calming effect of the peppermint stick, Dorothy spilled the entire story to Edna Petunia. She even told her that Carter had kissed her, and that she longed for him to touch her in that way again.

"I know you think I'm old and batty, and maybe I am...but you have to be careful who you show your petunia to, Dorothy. When I met Cletus, I knew he was the right man for me, but not all men are cut from the same mold. I was one of the lucky ones—"

Dorothy grimaced. She didn't want to think about her adoptive parents having sex. "Okay, I get your point. Don't worry, I'm certainly not going to show my petunia to him. I don't know if he's even talking to me outside of work."

"Honey, you did nothing wrong. Some things just aren't meant to be. I am sure you'll find someone one day that makes you feel just as special." Edna Petunia patted Dorothy on the shoulder and went back downstairs to finish cooking dinner. Dorothy finished munching her peppermint stick, washed her hands, and headed downstairs to join her family for their meal.

With a house full of girls, there was always someone who was having trouble with something or other. It would be nice to catch up with her family and tune into someone else's problems. That way, she could ignore her own...then maybe they'd go away.

\* \* \*

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, Dorothy took a different route than usual to the house where she worked with Carter. She felt refreshed after her talk with Edna Petunia, and even more determined than ever to be professional at work and set aside her feelings for Carter.

"Hello," Carter mumbled as he riffled through stacks of paper Dorothy had filed the day before. "I can't find anything!"

Dorothy tried not to look exasperated. She had been in a good mood, but it was clear that Carter was not. She forced a cheerful grin on her face and found the paper Carter was looking for.

Humming one of her favorite songs, she made coffee for Carter without him having to ask for it. She brought freshly made cinnamon rolls out of her lunch bag and put one on a small dish for Carter.

"Thank you." Carter chewed the doughy treat with a dreamy look on his face. "These are delicious."

"You're welcome. Minnie makes them often."

"Who's Minnie?" Carter asked between bites. "Oh, wait, let me guess. Another sister?"

Dorothy smiled. She knew it seemed crazy to him, but she loved her large, rambling family. She wouldn't have it any other way.

"You know, we've never talked about that." Dorothy was thinking out loud.

"About what?"

"Well, now I know your ideal woman, and you know my ideal man. But how big of a family do you want?"

Carter blinked a few times. He looked as if he'd never considered the question. "I've always assumed I'd have one, of course. I'll settle down in a small house near the courthouse in Austin. Then there's food and private schooling and other expenses to consider. I wouldn't want to have more than one."

Dorothy smiled sadly. Carter was so logical in his plan for himself. He would find himself a nice, logical wife and settle down to have one nice, logical child who would one day go on to reproduce with someone else's nice, logical son or daughter.

"I've always known I wanted a big family. Not as big as the one I have now—I'll leave the really huge family to Penny—but I want at least four or five children. That way, they'll always have someone to play with, to laugh with, to cry with. I think it's very important for children to have that."

"I see." Carter was silent for a while, then snapped to attention. "Well, we're wasting time. The case will go to the judge in less than two weeks, and I need to prepare my opening remarks. Get out the typewriter."

Dorothy tried to focus on the task at hand. It would be her first time using his typewriter. She usually took dictation by hand for correspondence. She had used a typewriter once before, back in New York, and was excited to try one again. She slid a piece of paper into the machine and set the carriage all the way to the left.

"I'm ready."

The morning passed quickly. The cinnamon roll had helped cheer Carter up considerably. He was still obsessed with efficiency and work, of course, but a little kinder about it than usual. He even reminded Dorothy to break for lunch exactly at noon.

"Let's eat outside today."

Dorothy was surprised but grateful at the suggestion. "That sounds perfect." The two sat in silence at a small table outside Carter's house. Dorothy ate the pork sandwich she'd packed as a lunch and Carter ate a handful of nuts.

"It really is a lovely day out." Dorothy sighed and closed her eyes,

breathing in the deep scents of the trees and bushes that surrounded the house.

"It is beautiful out here. But don't you ever wish for something more than what Nowhere has to offer?" Carter seemed genuinely curious, but Dorothy didn't want to get into an argument.

"I don't know, sir. Can't we just enjoy this glorious day, without getting into a big debate about city versus small town?" Dorothy's tone came off a little sharper than she intended. To her surprise, Carter simply smiled.

"I respect a woman who can put me in place from time to time."

Dorothy smiled as she chewed a piece of her sandwich.

"As long as she's able to be put into her place when it's needed," Carter added. A small thrill coursed through Dorothy's body. She felt a deep longing inside of her to be as close to Carter as possible. She could tell he felt it, too.

"Perhaps this evening, Miss Sanders, you could continue to show me around Nowhere?"

Dorothy grinned, thrilled he'd remembered. "I don't know. I do have quite an active social calendar, so I'll have to check on that."

"Please do, and get back to me. For now, let's get back to work."

Dorothy nodded and followed Carter back into the house. She'd have to think of something really special for that evening. She wanted to make sure Nowhere left a good impression on him. She knew he was partial to the city, but she was positive she could change his mind.

\* \* \*

THAT EVENING, Dorothy and Carter trotted along on two horses from Penny and Tom's farm. Dorothy knew some fresh country air would be good for Carter after spending days in his dusty house, reviewing letters and log books. She'd convinced Penny to let them ride a couple of their horses in exchange for Dorothy helping cook for the boys. Tom and Penny could barely keep up with the appetites of their seventeen adopted boys as it was, and now that Penny was pregnant, it was even more of a challenge.

"Excuse me, did you say your sister has *seventeen* adopted sons?" Carter looked like he might become ill.

"Yes. But that's just the beginning. Tom is the seventh son of a seventh son. So this baby will definitely be a boy, and all the rest as well. They'll have twenty-four sons when all is said and done."

Carter looked like he was having an attack of some sort. His face had gone white, and his mouth was set in a firm line.

"Are you all right?" Dorothy asked cautiously.

"I'm fine. Just in a bit of shock."

"Do people in the city not have big families? I guess I've never really stopped to consider it."

"I've always thought that family is what you make of it."

"I like that."

They rode along quietly for a few minutes. It was just before dusk, and the temperature was cooling down a bit. They came to the edge of a pond, and Dorothy prodded her horse over to it, allowing the mare to sip water.

"I'll bet you don't have fresh water like this in Austin." Dorothy tried not to sound smug, because she didn't want to make it a competition. But she did want to show Carter that the country had its strong points, too.

Carter laughed. He was normally so serious during the day, so it was nice to see him loosen up a bit. "No, I don't suppose so. We do have other things, though."

"Like what?" Dorothy knew she was being forward, but couldn't help herself.

Carter pulled his horse up next to Dorothy's. They stared at one another for a few moments, and then he leaned down toward her. Suddenly, his horse took off with a loud splutter. Carter shouted in surprise.

Dorothy spurred her horse to chase after Carter and his runaway mare, soon catching up to them. "I'm so sorry! I don't know what got into her—"

Carter interrupted Dorothy. "It doesn't matter. I think I've seen enough of Nowhere for this evening."

Dorothy tried to hide her disappointment. "All right. We can head back."

Carter had already set off down the path, and the spell of a few moments before had been broken. Dorothy sighed and followed after him.

When they got back to Penny and Tom's beautiful, rambling house and brought the horses back into their stalls, they ran into Cletus.

"What are you doing here?" Dorothy wouldn't be surprised if the old man was spying on her.

"Edna Petunia finished knitting booties for Penny and Tom's baby, and she said she thought I needed to deliver them tonight, just in case the baby comes early!"

Dorothy thought Cletus's excuse sounded made-up. She decided not to call him out on it, however. She had learned that the old man had his reasons for the way he acted. It had served him well in life, and she couldn't judge him for that.

“Carter Reeves,” Carter extended a hand to Cletus. Cletus stared at him for a second, sizing him up, then shook his hand. “I remember you from our law exam. If memory serves, you were one of the highest scores in the class.”

Cletus grinned. “You’re correct—and as I recall, so were you.”

Carter nodded.

“Good to see you again, but I won’t lie to you...I’m keeping my eye on you, boy.”

Dorothy couldn’t believe Cletus would threaten Carter. He had done absolutely nothing wrong; they had only been on a walk.

“Is that so?” If anything, Carter looked amused.

“Dorothy here is one of my girls, and if anyone ever harms one of my girls—well, let’s just say, you’ll be sorry you were ever born.”

“I understand that, Mr. Sanders. I wouldn’t think of hurting Miss Sanders. She’s been nothing but an excellent secretary these past weeks.” Dorothy felt nervous, but Carter’s eyes were shining.

“It had better stay that way. But just in case, my wife and I would like to have you over to our house for dinner tomorrow evening. On account of you spending so much time with our daughter. It wouldn’t be right if we didn’t get to know you.”

“I’d be obliged. What can I bring?” Dorothy was surprised that Carter answered so quickly, and her heart began beating faster at the thought of Carter in her house.

“No need to bring anything, we have all we need. And don’t you forget that.” Cletus tipped his hat and walked away, and Dorothy tried not to laugh. It was sweet how overprotective her parents were.

“Well. That was interesting.” Carter raised his eyebrows at Dorothy, and she let out a giggle. The man had an effect on her.

“Sometimes, they forget we’re grown women. Well, most of us are. I do have a few younger sisters who aren’t adults yet.”

Carter wrinkled his nose. “Every time I think I’ve seen them all, there’s another sister.”

“Just wait until tomorrow.”

\* \* \*

WHEN DOROTHY GOT home from work the next day, Edna Petunia was running around the kitchen like a mad woman. The table was set with good silverware and fine dishes left over from Cletus’s parents when they’d lived in the house. There was chicken frying on the stove, and Dorothy smelled the aroma of freshly-baked bread.

“Edna Petunia, if I didn’t know any better, I’d think you were trying to impress Mr. Reeves.”



Edna Petunia barely paid Dorothy any attention.

“Could you get the lemonade, dear?”

Theresa, Hattie, and Katie ran into the kitchen. Like Edna Petunia, they were in a state. Katie grabbed a broom from the closet and began sweeping the floor as she hummed.

“That’s what you’re wearing?” Theresa looked at Dorothy’s outfit in dismay.

“What’s wrong with this? It’s just dinner.” Dorothy tried to be calm, but nerves raced through her body. What if Carter didn’t like her family? What if Cletus scared him off? What if Edna Petunia tried to make a pass at him? Dorothy knew the old woman would be joking, the same way she teased her sisters’ suitors, but Carter wouldn’t know that. There were so many things that could go wrong.

Dorothy felt sicker and sicker as dinner time approached.

“We’ll show him that we know how to put on a proper meal,” Cletus huffed as he put on his suit jacket. “Just because we don’t live in the city doesn’t mean we’re any different from him and his kin.”

Carter arrived promptly, wearing a freshly-pressed suit and carrying a bouquet of flowers. Edna Petunia greeted him at the door and buried her face in the stems.

“Why, if I were a younger woman, Cletus might have something to be jealous over.” Edna accepted the flowers and planted a big kiss on Carter’s cheek. Dorothy shook his hand formally. She heard a few of her sisters snicker behind her.

“Penny was right—he’s dreamy!” Hope tried to whisper, but everyone in the room heard her clear as a bell.

“Shh!” Dorothy hissed.

“It’s lovely to meet you—all of you.” Carter smiled tightly. Dorothy could tell he was just as uncomfortable as she was. She showed him where he could sit, between Edna Petunia and Cletus. It wasn’t her first choice, but Edna had specifically asked that he be seated there, since she’d never met him before.

“You have a lovely home,” Carter told Edna Petunia. She grinned.

“The only thing that matters is the people in it. That’s what really makes it a home.”

“Yes, of course.”

Minnie helped serve the fried chicken, and Dorothy sliced the bread and passed it around the table.

“I hear you’ve been working day and night on an estate case in town, Mr. Reeves.” Cletus’s voice boomed loudly in Carter’s ear, startling him a bit. He swallowed a piece of bread quickly.

“Yes, that’s correct. I’ll be in Nowhere for just a few months.”

“One thing I learned when I was in law school myself...many of the people I studied with? Couldn’t trust ’em as far as I could throw

'em." Cletus made eye contact with Carter for a long time. Dorothy couldn't stand watching it.

"Carter's job is to find the truth!" Now Dorothy turned beet red. She hadn't meant to say anything, but she wanted everyone to know that Carter was a good man. Edna Petunia raised an eyebrow at Cletus.

"This chicken is excellent. Thank you!" Carter looked at Dorothy and she relaxed. She knew he was trying, and she also knew it was for her benefit. That soothed her frantic nerves.

"You're very welcome." Edna Petunia was always happy to receive compliments on her meals, even though she knew she was one of the best cooks in the area.

"I understand from Dorothy that you all have quite a few sisters, and brothers-in-law, and nieces, and nephews."

"Oh, yes!" Theresa, who loved to talk, began running through the entire list of relatives, oldest to youngest, and all of their associated spouses and children. Carter smiled, catching Dorothy's eye.

"I love that my grandbastards are nearby. Wouldn't stand for things being any other way." Cletus looked lovingly at Edna Petunia as she spoke. Carter seemed a bit surprised at the term 'grandbastard', but recovered quickly.

"It's very nice out here. A pleasant place to spend a few months."

"Or longer..." Edna Petunia suggested. "You never know, you might just want to settle down out here."

"Oh, no. I could never see that happening." Even though Dorothy knew how Carter felt about Nowhere, she hated hearing him say it out loud. Edna Petunia looked like she wanted to press the issue, but for some reason, didn't continue. She and Cletus exchanged a worried look.

Minnie brought out the pecan pie she had prepared for the evening's dessert. Dorothy helped her serve it, passing a piece to everyone. When she handed a plate to Carter, his fingertips brushed hers for a moment, and chills rippled through her body.

Dorothy couldn't look at him for the rest of dinner. Her face burned so badly she was sure it would catch on fire, and she didn't trust herself to say or do anything. She was relieved when Hattie began doing the dishes. She volunteered to help.

"Now that everyone's finished their meal, I'd like to see you alone in my office, Mr. Reeves." Cletus looked straight at Carter, as if he were challenging him. Edna Petunia let out a whoop, showing off her dentures.

"You be nice to our guest now, Cletus," she chided.

"We'll have to see about that." Cletus wore a serious expression on his face, and Dorothy felt herself getting flustered again. She said a

silent prayer that Cletus wouldn't be too hard on him.

Carter wasn't sure what he had gotten himself into. Dorothy's family was large, unruly, and downright peculiar. They weren't anything like he was used to...but at the same time, they'd made him feel welcome. Even though Cletus had been giving him a hard time, Carter could tell that it was only because the man cared for his adoptive daughters deeply. He figured that was why Cletus wanted to talk to him alone, but he also wondered what exactly the old man knew about his and Dorothy's relationship. He had a professional reputation to uphold, and he didn't want any untoward rumors starting about him and his hired help.

In the formal parlor, Cletus sat down in his big chair and motioned for Carter to have a seat across from him.

"Tell me now, and give it to me straight—what exactly are your intentions with our Dorothy?"

Carter was at a loss. Although words were normally his strength, he found himself speechless. "She's an excellent employee, sir. I would hate to jeopardize that for any reason."

"If that's the case, Mr. Reeves, then why are you out riding horses with her—or whatever you young folks are calling it these days—at all hours of the evening?"

"It's true, sir, that Dorothy has been showing me around Nowhere. Understanding the lay of the land around here will help me try my case."

"Remember, son, I've had just as much schooling as you have. I see through your words. If your intention is to return to Austin once your case is settled, why are you leading Dorothy on?"

Carter was taken aback. He had worried before that he might be setting false expectations with Dorothy, but he also genuinely loved spending time with her. She could make him laugh, and she could take him to task. It was a rare combination in a woman. Still, he did not want to make Cletus Sanders mad. The man had quite a reputation around town for being fiercely protective of his daughters.

"I understand, sir. I'll—I'll keep my feelings to myself and ensure that our relationship is strictly professional." Even as he said it, Carter knew it would be very difficult to keep his word.

"There is another way, you know."

"Excuse me?"

"This town could use a lawyer. I'll be running for town judge soon, and I could use a clerk. Then when I retire, you'd be able to take over. And in the meantime, there are always disputes over land and horses and chickens and all that comes with life in the country. It may be less formal than what you're used to, but it's an honest living and a good life."

“With all due respect, sir, I will be returning to Austin. I’m not meant for small-town life.”

“And with all due respect, son, you won’t truly know until you try.”

Carter sighed. The two men weren’t going to see eye to eye, that much was clear. “I want you to know, sir, that I do care for Dorothy. And I’ll do everything in my power to keep her happy.”

“Well, that’s something, at least. But you need to be honest with her about your intentions.”

“Yes, sir. I understand.”

“Good, then. Now, get out of here. It’s late, and I don’t want any rumors about any of my daughters and a fancy city lawyer.” Cletus walked Carter to the front door. Dorothy, Hattie, and Katie were standing in the hall, pretending they were dusting.

“I’ll walk you out, Mr. Reeves,” Dorothy said shyly. Cletus frowned, but didn’t say anything. Hattie and Katie giggled and started to follow Dorothy and Carter, but Cletus grabbed their shoulders and steered them in the other direction.

It was a clear evening, and Dorothy saw the half-moon hanging low in the sky as they walked outside. She hoped Carter would kiss her as he had outside the mercantile. Her body tingled as she anticipated his touch.

“Good night, Miss Sanders,” Carter said abruptly, and started off for his horses.

“Good night.” Dorothy was puzzled and disappointed. Had she done something wrong? She had half a mind to run after him, but it was getting late, and she wasn’t sure what she would even say to him. She didn’t want him to think she was desperate for his attention.

Dorothy watched as Carter rode off into the distance. She would figure out what was bothering him and get to the bottom of it. Plus, she saw him every day...she had plenty of other chances to get him alone.

## Chapter 5

**A**t work the next morning, Carter was quiet as Dorothy chattered

away about her sisters, the case, the weather, and everything else that came to mind. She sensed there was something he wasn't telling her, but she didn't want to push him.

The case was coming together nicely. She and Carter had found letters and log book entries proving that Mr. Drake had seen Mr. Parrish's mother several times, meaning there were several opportunities where she could have told him about his illegitimate son—perhaps even brought the baby to meet his father. There were a few loose ends to wrap up, but Carter felt confident he'd be able to win the case and get Mr. Parrish the land that was rightly his.

Dorothy enjoyed the steady pace of her work. She'd gotten accustomed to Carter's rhythms and enjoyed the fact that he seemed incapable of performing the simplest tasks without her. He was always asking where a specific book or journal entry was, or for an ink refill, or even where he had placed his coffee cup. Dorothy felt like she was doing something meaningful with her time. She knew that Carter was helping Mr. Parrish, and she was helping Carter...so in a way, she was helping people, too.

At lunch time, Dorothy suggested they eat outside, but Carter said he'd work straight through lunch.

"Aren't you hungry, though? You need to eat something."

"I don't need to eat anything, Miss Sanders."

"Well, you don't need to bite my head off."

"We've got a lot of work to do. That's all."

*Gee*, Dorothy thought as she took her sack lunch outside. *What's gotten into him today?* She ate alone outside, watching the sun stream onto the fields surrounding Carter's house.

When she went back into the house, Carter had taken several of the books she'd shelved that morning and strewn them across the floor. He was writing at a furious pace.

Dorothy began to gather the books from the floor and re-shelve them.

“Stop! I’m using those!”

Dorothy sighed. Carter seemed to be in a mood where he wasn’t going to allow anyone else to be happy. “Excuse me, Mr. Reeves, but what on earth is going on?”

Carter sighed and ran his hands through his hair. “I need to tell you something, and you’re not going to like it.”

Dorothy frowned and took a seat, waiting for Carter to speak his mind. She folded her hands in her lap, feeling on edge.

“I’ve very much enjoyed working with you and getting to know you, Miss Sanders. You’re very capable, and you’ve done a great deal for the case.”

“And?” Dorothy wasn’t sure where he was headed with this.

“I want to make it clear, in no uncertain terms, that I will be returning to Austin once the case comes to an end.”

Dorothy felt her cheery mood vanish. She was aware that Carter had to go back to the city eventually, but she hated any reminder of it.

“I want to make sure I’m not leading you on in any way, that I’m not tricking you into believing something that’s not true.”

Dorothy didn’t know what to say. Part of her wanted to fight for him to stay, to tell him that they’d only scratched the surface of her favorite places and things to do in Nowhere. He’d surely change his mind if he could see some of the things she had seen. The other part of her wanted to run as far away as she could, curl up into a ball, and cry.

Her voice wavered as she finally chose her words carefully. “That’s perfectly clear to me.”

Dorothy barely spoke to Carter at all for the rest of the day. She responded with one-word answers or nods of the head when he requested something or asked her a question.

When she was done for the day, she grabbed her things and headed out the door quickly.

“Have a good evening, Miss Sanders,” Carter said carefully. He knew she was upset but didn’t know how to make things better. Dorothy smiled politely in response and closed the door behind her.

Once she was home, she went straight to the bedroom she shared with her sister Martha. She pulled back her covers and climbed into bed, although it was not even five o’clock in the evening. Martha stared at her in surprise.

“Are you feeling sick?”

“Not really.”

Martha was sweet, but she kept most people at a distance, even Dorothy. Martha read her book and didn’t say another word. In this moment, Dorothy was grateful for that, because she didn’t want to talk at all.

When it was time for supper, Dorothy didn't go downstairs with everyone else. She stayed in her bed and tried to fall asleep, but all she could think about was Carter—his strong jaw line, his powerful arms, his shy smile that had once seemed like it was just for her. She had never felt this way about a man before, and now he was leaving her. It didn't seem fair.

Upon learning that Dorothy wasn't coming to dinner, Edna Petunia marched up the stairs and stood outside of her bedroom door.

"Dorothy, you have to eat dinner! None of you bastards will starve to death on my watch!"

Dorothy smiled despite herself. No one was as colorful as Edna Petunia when she was fired up about something. Still, she didn't feel like she had the energy to go to dinner and face the whole family. She felt like something inside her was breaking.

"I'm not feeling well," Dorothy called through the door. It wasn't completely true, but it wasn't a lie, either.

"Can I come in?" Without waiting for an answer, Edna Petunia pushed the door open and practically smothered Dorothy with a hug. "I'm sure it's nothing a peppermint stick can't fix." She started to pull her supply out of her bosom, but Dorothy put a hand on Edna's arm.

"No, no, I'm fine, really."

"Well, then. If you're fine, you can come to dinner!" Edna Petunia smiled triumphantly and helped Dorothy up. Groaning, Dorothy followed her down the stairs.

Dinner did make her feel a bit better—Edna Petunia had prepared a pot roast with all her favorite fixings—but she still carried a heavy weight on her shoulders. After she finished eating, she knew what she had to do.

"Cletus, may I use your study this evening?"

Cletus looked surprised, but nodded his head. Anything for his girls.

Dorothy went into the study and began composing a letter. It was the hardest one she'd ever had to write, but she knew it needed to be done. When she had finished, she signed and marked it with Cletus's seal that bore the name "Sanders." Feeling like she had accomplished something, she went upstairs to her room where she was finally able to sleep.

The next morning, Dorothy woke up as the sun was rising and left much earlier than usual for Carter's house. She slipped her letter through the mail slot and left without so much as knocking on the door.

CARTER ROSE PROMPTLY at seven as he always did, scrambled a few eggs and bacon in a skillet, and took breakfast in his study, waiting for Dorothy to arrive for the day. It was incredible how much he looked forward to the moment she walked through the door. He couldn't believe that just a few months before, he had never met her. The easy way they spoke to one another—and the undeniable attraction he had for her—made it seem like she'd always been a presence in his life.

Still, he knew he had to change. It was time to start acting much more professional. She was a good and wholesome girl, and he couldn't take advantage of the situation. She was his employee, and that was what she had to remain. He found himself wondering what she would be like in the city. She got along so well with everyone—he could see her thriving in a different setting, where she could meet more people and have even more friends than she did in her small town.

But that was just a foolish dream. Dorothy would stay put in Nowhere with her family. They clearly were all very attached to one another. He couldn't come between them. And, most importantly, he had a job to do. An obligation to his client. If Dorothy would ever show up—

Carter frowned. It was now quarter after eight. It wasn't at all like Dorothy to be late. He walked to the front of the house to check if he could see her on her way. He saw a small white envelope on the floor near the door addressed to him. He picked it up and carried it into his study. He slit it with a letter opener and unfolded it, then began to read.

Mr. Reeves,

I regretfully need to give you my notice. I can no longer continue to work for you. You have provided me a wonderful learning opportunity, and I have enjoyed getting to know you, but I can no longer be your secretary. At the risk of sounding unprofessional, I have developed feelings for you, and I cannot keep these feelings separate from my work. It wouldn't be fair to you or to me. I am very sorry for any inconvenience I have caused you.

Yours,

Dorothy Sanders

Carter exhaled sharply as he read the last few sentences. He felt his heart racing. She couldn't leave him. He *needed* her. His case was set to go to the town judge in less than a week. She was the one who knew where all the files were and how everything fit together. And more than that, he had counted on her sweet and kind nature, how she always saw the best in everyone...including him.

There was only one thing he could do, and that was to find her and convince her that she'd made a terrible mistake.



It was nearly eight-thirty when he set out from his house. He worried that he would lose most or all of the morning, but felt it was necessary for the case. He needed to focus on that first.

When he arrived at the Sanders' house, the main buggy he recognized from the evening before was gone, and there was no sign of Cletus, Edna Petunia, or any of the sisters. He cursed his luck. At every other point that summer, Dorothy's sisters had seemed to be everywhere he looked. Now that he needed to find her, they had all disappeared.

He decided to try to find her at the mercantile.

When he pulled up and hitched his horses to the post, he saw Ruby outside, two babies wrapped in thick blankets tucked into her arms.

"Good day, Mrs. Darcy."

"Hello. You must be Mr. Reeves. I've heard a lot about you from my sisters and parents."

"I'm afraid I have a rather delicate issue." At this, Ruby looked at him knowingly.

"Come on inside, Mr. Reeves. I'll fix you a cup of tea."

Carter followed Ruby inside the mercantile, where he saw a few young boys playing. "I don't want to be any trouble to you, Mrs. Darcy."

"It's no trouble at all. Tell me, what's on your mind?" Ruby set the twin babies down into a double bassinet and busied herself fixing tea for Mr. Reeves. "Do you take cream or sugar?"

"No, I don't need either. Thank you." Carter hesitated, unsure how much he wanted to reveal. The woman had a kind face, but she was also Dorothy's sister. He couldn't afford to make any more members of the Sanders family angry with him. "The trouble is, your sister has put in her notice...she doesn't want to work for me anymore. I'd like to talk it through with her, but I don't know where I can find her."

"Did you try the house? Before Dorothy started her job with you, she was there almost every day, doing chores to help Edna Petunia and Cletus." Ruby brought the cup of tea over to Carter, and he waited for it to cool off.

"I did. No one was there."

"Hmm. In that case, I know Dorothy does sometimes help out at the church. Our sister, Sarah Jane, is the wife of the pastor there. You might try there."

"Thank you. I'll give that a try." Carter sipped at the tea, still steaming from the kettle.

"You're welcome. I'm going to get to the back to work on some inventory. But Mr. Reeves?" Ruby seemed hesitant.

"Yes?"

"I'm not sure how much you know about my sister. But please

understand that she's got a good heart, and she'd never hurt a fly. That sometimes means her feelings are pretty sensitive. Please be careful, whatever it is you're talking to her about."

"I understand. Thank you, Mrs. Darcy." Carter felt worse and worse. If Dorothy had left him in a tough position, it was only because of his confusing actions toward her. The trouble was, he didn't know how he felt about her. He found himself wanting to spend time with her, thinking about her soft lips and her gentle touch. Their kiss that night outside the mercantile had been unlike anything he'd felt for a woman before.

However, he also had a job to do. He had an obligation to his client. And if Dorothy wasn't going to help him, he was going to have to figure it out on his own.

\* \* \*

DOROTHY WAS HAVING A MISERABLE DAY. Edna Petunia had seen how glum she was at breakfast and declared that they were all going to take a trip. The girls packed a picnic lunch full of bread, cheeses, and meats. Cletus prepared the wagon.

SINCE RUBY, Opal, Evelyn, Penny, and Sarah Jane had married, they no longer lived at home. Gertrude and Alice worked outside of the house during the day. That left just Betsy, Hope, Minnie, Martha, Theresa, Hattie, and Katie in addition to Dorothy. It was still a large bunch for a wagon, so Cletus made two trips. Edna Petunia had told Dorothy she knew the perfect spot for a picnic.

Dorothy was in the second group to ride to the picnic, and Cletus pulled up to a spot just outside Nowhere. Her sisters were setting up the picnic blankets and unpacking their lunch. There were logs surrounding the remains of a campfire and a tree stump. When Cletus got out of the wagon and tied up the horses, he went straight to the tree stump and sat down on it as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Edna Petunia sat in his lap and they looked proudly at their girls.

"How did you know there was a campfire all the way out here, Cletus?" Everyone seemed surprised at the pretty spot in the middle of the forest. Edna and Cletus shared a knowing smile.

"This here is a very special place for Edna and me. In fact, I believe this is where I got my first taste of her pep—"

"Delicious cooking!" Dorothy interjected. She knew that if Cletus and Edna kept spilling intimate details, all of the girls would quickly lose their appetites. Cletus sighed, but stopped his inappropriate talk

as Dorothy passed around some plates, but she caught Edna Petunia whispering something in Cletus's ear that made the old man turn bright red. Dorothy didn't want to know.

The family tucked in to their lunch and enjoyed the scampering animals and blowing leaves of the forest. Everything was quiet and peaceful, and for the most part, Dorothy forgot all about Carter Reeves. Until—

“Dorothy, why aren't you at work with Mr. Reeves?” Theresa asked bluntly. Katie gave her a panicky look, and put a finger to her lips.

“Because, because...because he's not good for me. If I kept working for him, I would have done things that I might have lived to regret.”

“Like what?” Theresa wondered out loud. Katie elbowed her.

“That's a topic for a different day, Theresa.” Edna Petunia gave Theresa a firm look, and that ended all discussion on the subject.

After that, Dorothy's sisters tried to steer the conversation to different areas, but the damage was done. She was withdrawn and silent for the rest of the picnic, her thoughts focused on Carter. She felt like she might just feel that way forever.

## Chapter 6

On his third day without Dorothy, Carter woke up earlier than usual to a banging on his door. For a brief instant, he imagined that it was Dorothy, that she changed her mind. He smiled at the thought as he rolled over in his bed, hoping to get back to sleep. But the banging continued.

Pulling an overcoat on over his bed clothes, he went to the door. Who could possibly be calling on him at so early? He opened the door cautiously, and saw none other than Edna Petunia Sanders.

"I don't have much time, so please let me in. I don't want Dorothy to know I'm here."

Carter had no choice but to let the old woman in. He offered her a seat in his parlor, which, like most of the house, was bare. He thought about offering her tea, but before he could, Edna started talking so quickly it was all he could do to listen to everything she said.

"Our Dorothy's in a state over you, Mr. Reeves. I don't know exactly what you said to her, but now that she's no longer working for you, she's just devastated. I've never seen the girl like that in all the years she's lived with us."

"I'm sorry." Carter felt like ever since he had met the Sanders family, all he did was apologize.

"Well?" Edna Petunia glared at Carter expectantly.

"Well, what?"

"What are you going to do about it?"

Carter was exhausted. All he kept thinking was his current situation would never occur in the city. People had manners and decorum. Old women wouldn't come barging into his house at the crack of dawn to harass him about their adopted daughters. It was a more dignified life.

However, he also couldn't deny the fact that he'd never felt half as much for any of the women he'd met in Austin as he felt for Dorothy Sanders. There was something about her that was so special and right for him...which made his present situation even more upsetting.

"I don't know."

“Well, you’d better figure it out—and fast!” With that, Edna Petunia stood and huffed out of the room.

Carter shook his head, weary and confused. He was not used to people expressing their opinions so freely. It was exhausting.

He boiled water on the stove to make coffee, deciding to get an early start to his day. He had very little time before he had to present a compelling argument to the judge.

Two hours and an entire pot of coffee later, Carter was at his wit’s end. He couldn’t find anything without Dorothy. She knew all the right places to look and could direct him to anything he was looking for.

Carter heard louder banging on the door. He swung the door open angrily and steadied himself for Edna Petunia’s wrath. To his surprise, it was a man wearing a cowboy hat and a plaid shirt.

“Mr. Robert Parrish. Pleased to make your acquaintance officially, Mr. Reeves.”

“Mr. Parrish! Come in, come in.”

Carter had never met his client in person before. Their correspondence had been through letters. Mr. Parrish’s cousin lived in Austin and had heard that Carter was one of the best young lawyers in the entire state, plus he charged a fair rate for his services. Mr. Parrish had hired him sight-unseen.

Carter ushered him into his parlor. “To what do I owe the pleasure of your company?”

“I’ll get right to the point—I’m nervous about the case. I’ve never been to court before, and I want to make sure it goes my way.”

“That’s common, Mr. Parrish.”

“Please, call me Robert.”

“Yes, Robert. Try not to worry too much. You’ll just need to state your name, promise to tell the truth, and answer a few very basic questions.”

“Okay, that doesn’t sound too bad. Can you show me what you’ve got so far?”

Carter was startled. Normally, showing a client all of his files a few days before court would be no problem. But in this case, he was floundering. He barely could find what he needed for his opening remarks, let alone the entire case file that would go before the judge.

“I’m afraid you’ve caught me on a busy day, Robert. Can you come back tomorrow, around two o’clock?” Carter thought that would give him enough time to prepare the case files. Robert looked worried, but nodded.

“I don’t like the idea of waiting another day, but I guess I trust you. I’ll be back tomorrow.”

Carter walked Robert out and watched the man ride off into the

distance. He certainly had his work cut out for him. He searched through the journals of notes Dorothy had taken from his dictations, but it was useless. He was much slower without Dorothy's patient assistance.

Finally, he threw the book he was reviewing to the ground. Enough was enough.

Carter saddled his horse and rode to the Sanders' house. He knocked at the door, and Minnie answered it. Her eyes widened when she saw who it was.

"Hello, Mr. Reeves," she said shyly.

"Hello, Minnie. Is Dorothy here?"

Minnie looked concerned. "Yes, but I don't know if —"

Edna Petunia heard the conversation and came rushing to the front of the house. "Oh, yes, she's here! *Dorothy!*" Edna screamed up the stairs.

Dorothy wondered what all the commotion was about. She walked downstairs carefully, not knowing what she was about to walk into. When she saw Carter standing in the entryway, her heart leapt into her throat.

"What are you doing here?" She knew her words were rude, but how could she be polite? He'd made it clear he didn't want her.

"Miss Sanders, I need to see you outside. Now."

Dorothy didn't even think about refusing him. His tone made it clear he wasn't going to accept an argument from her. She followed him outside and closed the door behind her.

Carter led her a few paces away from the house, stopping in the shadow of a large oak tree. He took her hand, and Dorothy's heart raced even faster.

"Robert Parrish came to my house today, asking after the case file for his court date next week."

Dorothy pulled her hand from his and crossed her arms. She didn't understand how this was relevant to her.

"I can't do it without you. I can't be the lawyer he needs me to be without you by my side. You've done so much work, and I find that I can barely get by without you. I know I've said and done things I shouldn't have. I'm not proud of it. The truth is, I genuinely care for you, Dorothy."

She loved the way he called her by her given name.

"But—it's too hard to work with you, knowing what we shared the other night. I don't want to go too far with you. Do you know what I mean?" Dorothy was worried her words might be too bold, but she didn't know a plainer way to say what she was feeling.

Carter couldn't stand it anymore. What she was saying made complete sense, and he understood her predicament. But he also

couldn't stop thinking about her lips. He took a step closer to Dorothy and pressed his mouth to hers, softly at first, then a bit harder. Dorothy kissed back at first, and then pulled away.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Dorothy, I couldn't help myself! You have to believe me."

"I don't know what to believe."

"Believe this—I care for you, deeply. And I also understand that we could never be together. We're from two different worlds, and no amount of kissing can change that, as sad as it may be. But please, Dorothy, let's both put our feelings aside just for the next week. I need you to work on the Parrish case with me."

Dorothy's mind was reeling. She felt weak-kneed from the kiss—it had been even more powerful than the night outside the mercantile. She wanted to jump into his arms and keep kissing him like that for the rest of time.

"I don't know, Mr. Reeves. I just don't know if I can do that."

"I don't know either, Dorothy. But we have to try—for Mr. Parrish. That estate is rightly his, but if I don't prove that to the judge, he'll be out on the streets without a penny to his name. He used his savings to pay my legal fees."

Dorothy paused, considering. She wanted to do the right thing.

"You wouldn't be doing it for me, Dorothy. You'd be doing it for Mr. Parrish."

"All right. I'll help you, but only until the case goes to the judge. Then, you're on your own for packing up and getting out of Nowhere. I can't see you again, Mr. Reeves."

Carter looked hurt. "I see."

"That's the only way I can work with you again. Do you accept those terms?"

"Yes, Miss Sanders." With that, he formally shook her hand and waved goodbye to her. "I'll see you tomorrow at eight o'clock sharp."

"Yes, Mr. Reeves."

Dorothy sighed as he rode away. Every time she thought she was done with the man, he kept pulling her back in. If this was what love felt like, it was terrible!

\* \* \*

THE NEXT FEW days passed by in a blur of paperwork and files. When Robert Parrish came to the house for the second time, he was pleased to see a neat, organized pile of paperwork relating to his case file. He told Carter and Dorothy that he was pleased with their work.

DOROTHY DID her best to focus only on the work. Occasionally, her mind drifted to thoughts about Carter, replaying the moments when he'd kissed her over and over again in her mind. But when that happened, she got a cold glass of ice water and splashed a little in her face.

"What are you doing? Are you all right?" Carter looked concerned.

"Don't worry a thing about it. We have work to do." Dorothy looked at him sternly. It felt good to put him in his place from time to time. She had no way of knowing, but she was pretty sure he was having trouble keeping their relationship strictly professional, too.

Every time he leaned over her shoulder to grab a book, or their fingertips brushed as she passed him a journal, or he helped her up into the wagon, she felt a tingle run through her entire body. She knew she wasn't imagining it.

Still, they had a case to win. And there was still a lot of work to be done. The town judge had a reputation for being extremely thorough. It was Carter's job to prove not only that Mr. Drake had known about his son, but also to provide a record of all of his assets. Dorothy had painstakingly gone through all the papers at Drake's home and logged them all in a journal.

By the end of the week, Carter was feeling great about his chances with the town judge, yet despondent when he thought about Dorothy. It was driving him crazy to not tuck a stray piece of hair behind her ear, or try to kiss her when she was close to him, or put an arm around her waist as she leaned over to file something.

On Friday evening, he couldn't take it anymore.

"I have to confess, Miss Sanders, I'm having a very hard time keeping our relationship strictly professional."

Dorothy breathed in a sigh of relief. So it hadn't been all in her head after all! But she knew that she couldn't allow either of them to give in to their feelings.

"Mr. Reeves, we have a job to do. It's your duty as an attorney. Good day." With that, Dorothy marched proudly out of the house. As soon as the door closed behind her, she leaned against it and slumped down to the ground. Walking away from Carter had taken every last bit of energy she had. She needed a break before she began the long walk home.

Carter was trembling inside the house. Dorothy was all he could think about. He could barely eat or sleep without a thought or dream of Dorothy taking over his mind. He admired her conviction, but he wished she didn't have so much of it.



## Chapter 7

Over the weekend, Dorothy tried to forget all about Carter Reeves. She went to Ruby's house and played with the twins, then helped Ruby prepare supper for the entire family.

"Penny for your thoughts...but I think I know what's on your mind." Ruby teased Dorothy as she peeled potatoes for a stew.

"And what's that?"

"Mr. Carter Reeves."

"Oh, I don't know about that. He's my boss, and that's it."

"Dorothy, you can tell me anything. You know that, right?"

Dorothy stopped peeling for a moment. "I'm trying not to think about him."

"Because he's all you can think about. Does that sound right?"

"Well, yes." Dorothy was near tears now.

"It'll be all right. Come on, now. What's wrong?"

"It's just...well, I always thought I'd never find a man like you, or Opal, or Sarah Jane, or Evelyn, or Penny. And then I met Mr. Reeves. I feel like anything is possible with him. That maybe I could actually end up with someone. That maybe he was *the one*."

Ruby nodded encouragingly at her younger sister.

"But he's definitely going back to Austin after the case is over. He hates Nowhere, says it's no place for a man like him. So I'll probably never see him again!" Dorothy was crying now, and Ruby found a handkerchief for her. "If I never see him again, I...I...I don't know *what* I'll do!"

Ruby wrapped her arms around Dorothy, rubbing her shoulders up and down to soothe her.

"Oh, Dorothy, I'm so sorry. You know, when I met Lewis, I felt a lot of the things you are feeling now."

"You did?"

"Absolutely. It wasn't exactly the same, not by any stretch, but the fact of it was, I didn't know if things were going to work out. For a while, it seemed like they wouldn't."

"Really? I didn't know that." Dorothy dried her eyes with a

handkerchief.

"Sure. I was all mixed up, feeling sad and confused. But then Lewis and I talked about it. And I realized he was the only one for me, so nothing else was going to get in the way of that. Does that make sense?"

"But Ruby, if Carter is the only one for me, what does that mean? That I'm doomed to be alone forever?"

"No, no, not at all! I don't know what it means just yet. But that's part of the fun, not knowing how things will work out. I'm saying you never know, sometimes people surprise you."

Dorothy appreciated that her sister was trying to cheer her up, but at the moment, she could see no way that her situation would improve with time. She placed all the peeled potatoes into the pot and stared down at the boiling water.

"Thanks, Ruby. I sure hope things will work out for me, too."

Ruby smiled at the younger girl. Now that she had a family, it was hard to remember what it was like to be single. Her heart went out to Dorothy. She was sure it wasn't easy.

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DOROTHY AND CARTER figured out that the best way to work together without crossing any boundaries was to stay quiet, avoid all unnecessary chitchat, and communicate mostly through written lists or questions. The days were long and dull, but they avoided touching, kissing, and any other sort of flirtation. Dorothy couldn't wait for the week to be over so that she'd be out of Carter's house for good.

Carter was starting to regret that his days in Nowhere were numbered. He was excited, of course, to get back to his home in Austin...but he also felt that his time in the country had passed too quickly. He was sad that he hadn't been able to go with Dorothy to all her favorite spots in the town. But he knew they were making the right decision, focusing only on business and not pursuing a romantic relationship.

The truth was, there were many women in town that weren't as pure and good as Dorothy was, but were interested and available. It had never been hard for Carter to get a date, and that wouldn't change once he returned to Austin. But when he tried to picture going out on a date again, the face he kept coming back to was Dorothy's.

As the court date approached, Carter began to worry about all the possible ways the judge could side against Mr. Parrish. He felt that they'd prepared well, but the judge was supposed to be a stickler. One document with an incorrect date or missing character could ruin their

entire case. He made Dorothy stay late, going over each and every file again and again.

Robert Parrish even came back, and Carter practiced giving his prepared remarks. When he was done, both Robert and Dorothy applauded.

Dorothy felt there was no way the judge could side against Mr. Parrish. Then again, she didn't know much about the law, and this was her first court case.

The night before they were scheduled to see the judge, Dorothy went to see Penny. Penny loved to sew clothing and often wore the latest styles. Dorothy asked her sister if she had anything that might look nice in court.

"Could this possibly have anything to do with Mr. Reeves?"

Dorothy laughed. "No! I want to look nice before the judge. It's my first impression as a professional woman."

Penny nodded. "I see. Let me think...yes, I believe I have just the thing!" Penny disappeared into one of the rooms in her house and emerged with a blouse and skirt. The top was plain but classic, with simple buttons up the front. The skirt was dark, with a little flounce to it, but was still long enough to be appropriate for a formal occasion such as court.

Dorothy tried on the garments quickly. "It's perfect, Penny, thank you! I owe you!"

"You can pay me back in cooking for these boys. I can't keep food in the cupboards. It just disappears!" Penny exclaimed. "And now that I'm expecting, I'm so tired all the time."

"Yes. I'll be done working for Mr. Reeves after tomorrow. I can spend time here, helping you around the house and the cabins."

"That would be wonderful, Dorothy! You're so sweet to think of me during all this. Now get on out of here—you've got a case to win!"

Dorothy tried to imagine what the judge would be like. She wasn't sure if he'd be old like Cletus, or young like Carter. She wondered if he'd listen to Carter, if he'd carefully consider each and every document that they'd gone over together. She also didn't know what the other attorney would be like. It was strange to think of someone else doing all the hard work that she and Carter had done, but for the opposing side.

There was something else bothering Dorothy, but she tried not to think about it too much. The next day would be the last time she ever saw Carter Reeves. She knew they could never be together, but that wouldn't make it any easier to say goodbye. She was thankful for her large family, because they would surely be able to distract her from her troubles.

DOROTHY WOKE bright and early on the morning of Mr. Parrish's court date. She had hardly been able to sleep the night before. She prayed that the judge would find the verdict in Mr. Parrish's favor.

Dorothy washed her face and put on the clothes Penny had lent her. She set off for Carter's house and tried to think about the case only, not dwell on any improper thoughts about her boss.

When she knocked on Carter's door, she waited a long time before he answered. When he let her in, she saw that the floor was covered in papers and boxes. Carter looked sheepish. "I wanted to get a head start on my packing."

Dorothy nodded, trying not to show emotion. "That's good. Do you know how long we'll be at court?"

"It shouldn't take longer than a few hours, but it all depends on the judge. We'll see." Carter looked nervous, which made Dorothy feel even more unsettled. He stared at her for a long time without saying a word.

Finally, she had to break the silence. "We should be going, then." They had promised to pick up Mr. Parrish and take him to Nowhere's town hall, where the judge would preside over the case. They still had plenty of time, but Dorothy felt anxious.

Dorothy turned to leave the house, but Carter grabbed her hand and spun her back around. He removed a small box from his pocket and got down on one knee.

"Dorothy Sanders, I've never met anyone like you. You're kind to everyone, and you see the good in all people. You do everything you can to fight for what's right. I couldn't sleep last night, knowing that I might not see you again after today. Will you do the honor of becoming my wife?"

Dorothy used her other hand to cover her mouth. She couldn't believe what Carter had just asked her. She had always dreamed of a moment just like this, but there was something that wasn't quite right.

"But I thought you said you're still moving back to Austin?"

Carter looked confused. "Yes, of course. That's where my law practice is—where my whole life is. Everything except for you."

"I can't leave Nowhere, Mr. Reeves. My family is here."

"Dorothy, call me Carter, please. I think you'll love it in the city. There is always something going on. There are shops and theaters and restaurants. There are so many places I want to show you."

"I'm so sorry, Carter. Edna Petunia and Cletus have shown me what it means to have a family. And this is where my sisters have chosen to make their homes and start their families. If I lived in Austin, I'd never see them. I wouldn't be around as my nieces and

nephews grow up.”

Carter took a deep breath. He had been nervous that Dorothy would say no to his proposal, but he never thought her family would be the reason. He set his lips in a grim line and rose to his feet. He tried to stop the storm of regret and anger he felt coming on. “All right, then. Let’s go pick up Mr. Parrish.”

Tears welled up in Dorothy’s eyes. She brushed them away with her handkerchief as she followed Carter out the door.

On the way to pick up Mr. Parrish, she tried to make conversation, but Carter simply put his hand up to stop her from speaking. When they arrived at Mr. Parrish’s house, he came out dressed in a black suit with a patch of gray fabric on one of the knees.

“You two look like somebody died.” Mr. Parrish pulled himself up into the wagon and shook his head at Dorothy and Carter’s miserable faces. “Is there something you’re not telling me?”

“No. We’re fine.” Carter tried to smile.

“Well, I hope you’re a better lawyer than you are an actor.”

## Chapter 8

Carter pulled up to Nowhere's town hall just before eight o'clock.

The case was scheduled for eight thirty in the morning and was the judge's first of the day. There were a few people wandering around outside of town hall, and a woman juggling a stack of ledgers opened the door for them. Carter led the way through a narrow hallway into a large room.

It reminded Dorothy of church, because there were many benches set up all facing the front of the room. There was a place for the judge to sit, and a few desks next to it looking out at the rest of the room. In between those areas were two desks. Carter set the papers he'd brought with him down at one of the desks, and Dorothy did the same. Mr. Parrish began to pace around the desk.

"Don't worry, Mr. Parrish. I'm sure the judge will be fair today. He has to be." Dorothy tried to assure the nervous man. Carter shook his head at her.

"Maybe you'd be more comfortable in the hallway." Carter stared at Mr. Parrish, and the older man nodded and went back into the hallway. Carter turned his gaze back to Dorothy.

"I never say things like that to a client. I don't have any control over the judge, and I can't predict the future." Dorothy had never heard Carter sound so angry with her. She looked at the floor, then squared her shoulders and looked him right in the eyes.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Reeves. I won't make the same mistake again."

Carter nodded dismissively, but Dorothy detected a small expression of approval. She only had a few more hours as his employee, and she was as determined as ever not to let her feelings for him interfere with her work.

A large older man with a bushy beard and booming voice walked in. Two younger men who looked closer in age to Carter accompanied him. The big man introduced himself as Mr. Billings, the opposing attorney. Mr. Drake's relative was with them. He looked like he was having a hard time standing upright, so one of Mr. Billings's assistants helped him to a seat in the gallery.

Soon, a small man wearing glasses and a long black robe entered the hall. He took the judge's seat and banged a gavel on his table, which was higher than everyone else's.

"I am the Honorable Justice Harold Evans, and I will preside over today's dispute." He had a soft voice, and Dorothy strained to hear him. It was hard to imagine him voicing an opinion on anything. She had no doubt that if Cletus were elected town judge, he'd rule over a much more colorful—and decisive—courtroom.

Dorothy crossed and uncrossed her legs below the desk as Justice Evans reviewed the papers Carter and Mr. Billings placed before him.

"You may proceed." The judge nodded, and Carter stood up and took his place at the front of the room. Dorothy looked away, focusing on the judge.

"Your Honor, my client, Robert Parrish, is the rightful heir and owner of the Drake land in Nowhere. The boundaries are clearly designated on the map I've provided. We will show today—beyond a shadow of a doubt—that the late Mr. John Drake did in fact have a son, Robert Parrish, and that Mr. Parrish should inherit the land as the closest blood relative of the deceased."

Carter sat back down at the desk and Mr. Billings began his opening statement.

"I will prove here today, in this court of law, that the plaintiff, Robert Parrish, is a liar! His claim to the land in question is no more than yours or mine." Although Dorothy hadn't been to any courtrooms before, it sounded like Mr. Billings was simply raising his voice, and not saying much of anything.

After the opening arguments, Justice Evans asked to see the logbooks over the period of years surrounding Robert's birth. Carter turned to Dorothy, and she felt her face flush. She knew by heart which book contained those dates, and retrieved it quickly. She walked to the front of the room and handed it to the judge.

Carter tore his eyes away from Dorothy and focused on the papers in front of him. He had to put his personal feelings aside, at least for a few more hours. Carter wiped sweat from his brow with a handkerchief and waited for Judge Evans to say something. But the man simply continued to read through the logbooks.

Dorothy could tell that both Carter and Mr. Parrish were getting nervous. She flashed Mr. Parrish her brightest and biggest smile, hoping to set him at ease.

Finally, the judge spoke. "Very well, Mr. Reeves. You may proceed."

"Thank you, Your Honor. As you have seen in the Exhibit, Mr. Drake kept records of his meetings with Mr. Parrish's mother, Miss Louise Parrish. They show that Miss Parrish brought her young son

with her—and that Mr. Drake acknowledged that he was the father of the child.”

“Your Honor, Mr. Reeves is spouting off nonsense that can’t be confirmed.”

“It seems to me I’ve got a book that confirms what Mr. Reeves is saying, Mr. Billings. Do you have any exhibits to introduce?”

Mr. Billings’s face turned purple and he balled his hands into fists. “Not at this time.”

“This seems like a straightforward case to me. Robert Parrish is John Drake’s son. By county law, that land is rightfully his. I don’t need to hear any further arguments on the matter.” The judge tapped his gavel on his desk and exited the room. Dorothy could hardly believe it.

“I’m so happy for you!” Dorothy exclaimed to Mr. Parrish, who was still seated in the audience wearing a shocked expression.

“Thank you, Miss Sanders. And thank you, Mr. Reeves. Thank you both for believing in me and fighting for me. I won’t forget it.”

“Only doing my civic duty.” Carter shook Mr. Parrish’s hand. On the other side of the courtroom, Mr. Billings and his assistants were shouting at one another. “Maybe we should get out of here.”

They stepped outside into the dry heat of the late morning.

“I can’t thank you enough for what you’ve done for me. I think I’ll set off now and start unpacking my things. If you ever need anything, you let me know.” Robert could not contain his huge grin. Dorothy wished him the best of luck and shook his hand formally. Carter did the same.

When it was just the two of them standing outside the town hall, Dorothy had no idea what to say. She knew she’d never see Carter again, and that got her feeling all mixed up inside.

Carter had no idea how to say goodbye to the pure, kind, and honest woman in front of him. He was still hurt by her refusal, but he also understood where she was coming from. He had seen the way she and her family acted around each other. They may have been a little—or a lot—odd, but they truly loved one another.

He decided to be as direct as possible. “Do you have a way home?”

Dorothy thought for a bit. She had hoped he’d give her one final ride in the wagon. “I could walk home.”

“All right, then. Thank you for your hard work, Miss Sanders.”

Carter gave her a brief, firm handshake and walked over to where his horses were hitched to a post. Dorothy’s eyes filled with tears. She blinked them back and set out on the long walk home to the Sanders residence.

As Carter pulled away from the town center, he watched as Dorothy slowly picked her way through the street. He wished more



than anything that she could be sitting in the wagon with him.

## Chapter 9

Dorothy heard shrieking as she walked toward the front door of the house. She turned the door handle, but it was stuck. She pushed her side against the door, but it only pushed open a few inches. “Can someone let me in?”

“Who is it?” Dorothy could hear Edna Petunia all the way from the kitchen. She also heard pots and pans clanging and chairs being dragged across the floor.

“It’s me! It’s Dorothy!” Dorothy was getting impatient. *What on earth are they doing?*

“Come ‘round the back!”

Katie let Dorothy in through the small door at the side of the house, giggling nonstop. Despite her foul mood, Dorothy found the corners of her mouth forming a smile. When she stepped into the house, she saw piles of clothes, books, pots, and dishes piled high on the floor. The kitchen was no better. Bowls and pans were scattered across the room, and Edna, Hattie, Hope, and Minnie were rushing around to various parts of the room.

“What is all this?”

“Don’t you remember? The big church picnic is tomorrow, and Micah asked me to cook!” Edna Petunia shouted to Dorothy from across the room. “Don’t just stand there, give us a hand!” Katie found Dorothy an apron and helped tie it around her waist.

“A few of us are going to take some food over tonight to set up. You should come!”

Dorothy was glad to see the other girls so excited, but she was also exhausted. “I don’t know about that. I might go to sleep early tonight. It’s been a long day.”

Edna Petunia clucked her tongue. “Nonsense. Nothing better to mend a broken heart than busy hands.” She handed Dorothy a spatula and a bowl of batter. “Just keep stirring.”

“What is it?” Dorothy peered at the pale, sticky dough.

“Don’t you worry about that, just keep stirring!” Dorothy shrugged and began to drag the spatula through the dough. Edna Petunia went

over to the stove and pulled a large pan of chicken out of the oven. She pulled a peppermint stick out of her cleavage and set it into the pan.

"What on earth are you doing?" Dorothy looked at her with a strange expression on her face.

"Adding flavoring, of course! A little bubbly sweat is good for the constitution."

Dorothy shook her head.

"That smells heavenly!" Minnie exclaimed. Dorothy had to admit it did smell delicious.

"Don't even think about it, girls!" Edna Petunia shot them all warning glances. The girls knew better than to disobey Edna Petunia. "So, is Mr. Reeves finally gone?"

"Yes. He really is." Dorothy felt a wave of tears coming on. She set the bowl of dough down on the table and pulled out her handkerchief. Edna Petunia set down the pan of chicken and rushed over to her.

"There, there...it will be all right." Edna Petunia was trying her hardest, but Dorothy knew the older woman couldn't possibly understand what she was going through. Edna Petunia had found the love of her life and made a home with him. Dorothy would never have that.

"You just remember...that city lawyer hides behind his fancy suits and big words because that's all he has." Edna Petunia sang a different tune now that she wasn't throwing herself at the man. "You, on the other hand, have everything going for you."

"That's not true. I don't have a job, I don't have any friends outside of this house, and I don't have anyone who excites me!"

Edna Petunia arched an eyebrow. "I didn't think we'd have this talk until you were getting married. Now, when a man—"

Dorothy held her hand up. "No, please stop! It's not that." Dorothy couldn't handle any lectures on intimacy by Edna Petunia. "I just meant, I've never met a man like Mr. Reeves before. I don't think I ever will again."

Just then, they heard a loud crack of thunder overhead, followed by a swift downpour. *That sound is exactly how I feel*, Dorothy thought.

\* \* \*

THE DAY HAD STARTED off clear and bright, so the lightning, thunder, and rain took Carter by surprise. He had stopped back at the house, packed up his remaining belongings, and loaded them into the wagon after his court appearance.

Then he'd returned the keys to the old widow he was renting from.

She had asked him in for a cup of tea, and feeling trapped, he had accepted. He was currently cursing his rotten luck, leaving town in the middle of a flash thunderstorm. The skies looked as if they'd ease up soon, but if they didn't, he would need to think of another plan.

At the first flashes of lightning, the horses got skittish. Carter tried to calm and slow them down, but they were on edge. He tried to identify his location, but the truth was, almost all of Nowhere looked exactly the same. He could have been on the edges of Main Street or on the far outskirts or halfway to Austin, and he wouldn't know the difference. Yet another thing he hated about the country.

There was something else. A new feeling, a different longing that hadn't been there when he had first arrived. He found himself appreciating the way the lightning illuminated the prairie, and the crack of the thunder overhead was almost musical. The rain beat down on his face, and despite the danger of his situation, Carter Reeves smiled—and that was when one of his axles broke.

\* \* \*

"DOROTHY!" Sarah Jane exclaimed. "I didn't think we'd see you today. Come on in." After the downpour had stopped, Cletus had brought Minnie, Dorothy, and a wagonload of food to Sarah Jane and Micah's house.

"What a wonderful bounty. Thank you so much. I'll bless it now." Micah greeted Cletus and his sisters-in-law. He was followed by Chrissy, the orphan he and Sarah Jane had adopted when they'd first been married. Chrissy was blossoming into a lovely young girl and adored spending time with her aunts. Little Carolyn was sleeping on the floor in the corner of the room. She always seemed to find a way out of her bed to sleep where the family was, and everyone knew they didn't need to be quiet. Nothing woke the toddler.

"Aunt Dorothy! I'm so happy you're here! Can I show you my new dolls?" Dorothy grinned. There was one perk of no longer having a job—she would now have plenty of time to spend with her nieces and nephews.

"Of course you can, Chrissy."

"Glad you made it safely here without getting stuck in that rainstorm." Sarah Jane looked outside. "Do you think it's going to start up again?"

"I reckon it's all done for tonight at least. Can't say for tomorrow."

"But the picnic is tomorrow! God wouldn't let it rain on the picnic, would he?" Chrissy looked horrified.

"Sometimes, God works in mysterious ways. We'll have a great day

tomorrow, no matter what, because we'll be with our family and our community." Micah was calm and reassuring. Dorothy knew he was an excellent father. Her thoughts drifted to Carter, and how his logic and reserved nature would probably make him a good father, too. She felt a pang in her heart. *I need to stop thinking about him. He's gone, and he's not coming back.*

"Come on, Chrissy. Let's see those dolls."

\* \* \*

CARTER TRUDGED THROUGH THE MUD. Although the thunderstorm had been brief, the downpour of rain had soaked much of the land. His shiny black shoes were covered in layers of dirt, and his feet felt shriveled inside his wet socks. He had been walking for what felt like hours.

He didn't have a replacement axle for the wagon, so he left the horses near a small stream and set out on foot for town. He had been pretty sure he was going in the right direction—but now he wasn't so sure.

When he came to a clearing with a small tree stump for the third time, he decided he needed to try a different direction. At this rate, he'd get to town sometime the following day.

Carter licked his lips, cracked and thirsty. He couldn't wait to return to the city. He was not meant for country life.

\* \* \*

ONCE THE FOOD had been packed away and Chrissy had shown Dorothy her dolls, Cletus told Minnie and Dorothy it was time to head out. He had no doubt that Edna Petunia would have more work for them to do that evening, and it was getting late.

"Good night, Chrissy!"

"Good night, Aunt Dorothy and Aunt Minnie! Good night, Grandpa Cletus!" Chrissy waved excitedly at them.

"Take care getting h—"

Sara Jane broke off at the faint knock at the door, then wrinkled her brow. "Who could that be at this hour?"

"It's no one from our house." Cletus frowned. "I've got the wagon."

Dorothy was nearest to the door, so she answered it.

Her heart began beating in a frenzy unlike anything she had ever experienced before when she saw the filthy, soaking wet man on the porch and realized it was Carter Reeves.

Dorothy gasped. "What are you doing here?"

"Water," was all Carter could manage.

Sarah Jane ran to get a blanket, and Micah brought over a glass of water. Dorothy helped Sarah Jane wrap him up in the blanket and guide him into a chair. Carter sipped the water, his teeth chattering from the cold.

"What happened to you, son?" Cletus wasn't interested in the coddling that was taking place in front of him. He simply wanted to know why Carter hadn't left Nowhere as he had intended—in other words, why he was continuing to play around with his daughter's heart?

"I was on my way back to Austin, and I broke an axle on my wagon. I couldn't fix it, and I didn't know where I was. So I left my horses, and started walking toward what I thought was town."

"Boy, you have no sense of direction, do you?" Cletus whooped. Dorothy and Sarah Jane both glared at him. As much as his daughters loved him, they cringed at his insensitivity.

"We should get you into some warm clothes. I can get you some of Micah's." Sarah Jane went into the bedroom.

"You shouldn't leave your horses out there overnight—it could storm again. I can go round them up. Any idea how far they'll be?" Cletus moved toward the window to take a closer look.

Carter thought very carefully. "I don't know exactly, but there was one spot I kept passing by. It was very level, and had a small tree stump...actually, it looked like it had been used as a camp site. That must have been close."

Cletus laughed. "I know exactly where you're talking about. I'll head there now."

"Do you want some help?" Micah always felt inferior around his father-in-law. Cletus seemed capable of almost any task, big or small. Micah was proud of his work as a man of God, but sometimes he wished he could show his father-in-law that he was handy, too.

"I don't need it, but I don't mind it, either. Come along."

Sarah Jane came out of the bedroom holding a pair of black pants and a white, long-sleeved shirt. "Here you go, Mr. Reeves."

"Thank you."

"Sarah Jane, Cletus and I are headed out to get Mr. Reeves's horses. We'll be back." Micah kissed his wife and Chrissy goodbye. "Chrissy, you'll be in bed by the time I get back. I'll see you tomorrow morning. I love you."

"I love you too, Daddy."

"Oh my goodness, I nearly forgot it was bedtime." Sarah Jane looked flustered. "Let's get you to bed, Chrissy. Mr. Reeves, you can use our parlor to change into these clothes. After I tuck Chrissy in, I'll

hang up your wet clothes so they can dry.”

“Thank you very much.”

When Sarah Jane left the room, Carter moved closer to Dorothy.

“When you opened that door—you have no idea how glad I was to see you.”

“I felt the same way. I thought I’d never see you again!”

“Dorothy, I can’t go back to Austin without you. Is there any chance you’ll reconsider my offer?”

Dorothy hesitated. She wanted so badly to say yes to his proposal. She had strong feelings for him that she couldn’t deny, and she couldn’t bear the thought of having to say goodbye to him yet again. At the same time, she couldn’t just abandon the only family that she’d ever truly known.

She spoke softly when she answered him. “I don’t think that could ever work. I could visit the city, but I couldn’t live so far away from my family. I’m sorry.”

Carter nodded his head. “I understand.”

“Do those clothes fit all right? I need to read Chrissy another story and then I’ll be in.” Sarah Jane was still in Chrissy’s room, but could hear Dorothy and Carter having a conversation.

“Yes, just fine, thank you!” Carter called across the wall to Sarah Jane, then turned his attention back to Dorothy. “I understand what I have to do.” He cleared his throat. “I can’t believe what I’m about to say. I plan to move to Nowhere and establish my practice here. I’ll assist Cletus where I can, and help out all the small business owners in the area. And the most important thing...I’m going to be the best husband you could ever ask for. Will you please be my wife? I hope you say yes, because I can’t go through this again.”

Dorothy threw her arms around Carter, not minding that he was still soaking wet from the rain. “Yes, yes I will!” Chills of happiness coursed throughout her entire body. She felt like dancing and cheering.

Carter put his hands around her waist, partly wrapping her up in his blanket, and kissed her straight on the lips.

“What’s going on in here?” Sarah Jane walked in and Dorothy jumped away from Carter. Sarah Jane had always had the highest integrity, even before she married a pastor. The downside of that was that she could be judgmental at times. She’d relaxed considerably over the past few years, but Dorothy was worried that she’d be offended by what she saw.

“We have an announcement to make.” Dorothy saw Carter smile fully for one of the first times since she’d met him. She now knew that he had a polite smile and a beautiful, big grin that he saved for truly special moments. “We’re getting married.”

“What? Oh, my goodness! Well, congratulations! When did all this come about?” Sarah Jane began to hug Dorothy. She started to hug Carter, but then stopped. “Oh, you still need to change into your dry clothes! Do that first!” She hurried over and scooped up her sleeping toddler from the floor. “I’m going to put this one back to bed.” Dorothy followed behind Sarah Jane, at ease with the bedtime ritual. “Edna Petunia is going to be so thrilled. She’ll finally get to plan a wedding. Oh, I’m so happy for you, Dorothy!”

“It’s a bit of a shock—I’m still in disbelief. But I’m so happy!”

“This is wonderful news. We can celebrate tomorrow at the church picnic.”

Carter came out of the bedroom dressed in Micah’s pants and shirt. The pants were a little loose, but the shirt fit him well. “Thank you again for these warm clothes. I already feel much better.”

“Whatever I can do for my future brother-in-law!”

At that moment, Cletus and Micah returned. “What’s this about a brother-in-law?” Cletus eyed Carter suspiciously.

“Dorothy and I are engaged.”

“Oh, you’re going to take her from us to the big city?” Cletus tried not to sound too upset, but it hurt him more than he’d like to admit.

“No, that’s the best part. Carter’s going to move here, and we’re going to live in Nowhere together!”

“Well, then, I’m very happy for you, sweetheart. You’re a good man, Mr. Reeves.” Cletus gave Carter a hearty handshake and a pat on the back. “I guess you’re not so bad, after all.”

“Cletus!” Sarah Jane hissed. She and Dorothy exchanged a look. He really could be unbelievable sometimes.

“We got the horses and tied them up outside. They were drinking plenty of water. They’re doing fine now, but you might want to stay here for the evening.”

“Would that be all right? I don’t want to inconvenience you.”

“Not at all. You’re going to be family soon enough.” Micah gave his future brother-in-law a handshake as well.

“Well, Minnie and Dorothy, we should head back home. I think we’ve all had enough excitement for one evening.”

Dorothy wished she could stay with Carter, but she knew Cletus would never allow it. She settled for a kiss on the cheek.

“Good night, my love.” Carter whispered softly in her ear after he pressed his lips to her face. A tingle of anticipation began in her abdomen and traveled throughout her body.

“Good night.”

When they arrived home, they found Edna Petunia in the kitchen, still cooking three or four recipes at the same time.

“I’m going to run out of peaches—or is it watermelon? Oh wait,



apples. Yes. Apples.”

“My beautiful bride, you need to take a small break.”

“Why is that, you old coot?”

“Because our Dorothy has something she needs to tell us.”

Katie, Martha, and Hattie perked up at this. They joined Edna Petunia, Cletus, Minnie, and Dorothy in the kitchen.

Dorothy took a deep breath. “Carter Reeves asked me to marry him, and I said yes. He’s going to move to Nowhere!”

The girls began screaming and crying and hugging Dorothy.

“I’m so happy for you! Oh, I can just see everything about your wedding. We’ll invite everyone, of course!” Edna Petunia had a glint in her eyes that could only mean that Dorothy had her work cut out for her. She tried to muster up excitement for the old woman. The truth was, Dorothy didn’t want to plan a wedding. She just wanted to be married to Carter. He was all she’d ever wanted.

## Chapter 10

The day of the church picnic was hot and dry as usual, with no trace of the previous night's thunderstorms. Dorothy had washed and dressed as soon as she woke up so she could be among the first family members to set up for the picnic. Cletus made three wagon trips to Sarah Jane and Micah's house—a group of daughters, a load of food, and a second group of daughters along with Edna Petunia.

When Dorothy arrived at the church, she was thrilled that Carter was already there helping Sarah Jane and Micah set up. When he saw her, he grabbed her by the hand and took her to the side of the parsonage, where they could have a little privacy.

"I thought about you all night."

"Me, too." Dorothy knew she was blushing, but she didn't care.

"Have you given any thought to when you want to be married?"

"I haven't. I know Edna Petunia is trying to plan the wedding of the century, but I'd prefer a smaller wedding. What about you?"

"I don't know if I can stand another evening where we're not husband and wife."

Dorothy felt butterflies in her stomach. *Tonight?* She found that despite her nerves, she was starting to enjoy that idea. "What about your parents? Don't you want to make sure they're here?"

"My parents will be very happy when they meet you. I know they'll love you. But they're not very interested or active socially. I know they won't mind if we elope."

Elopement—it sounded so magical to Dorothy. But she didn't want to upset Edna Petunia. She knew her mother had her heart set on planning one of the girls' weddings, and so far, each and every one of the older girls had gotten married with very little notice. It felt almost cruel to deny this to a woman who had been so charitable and loving to them.

But every time Carter brushed her arm or locked eyes with her, she knew she didn't want to waste another moment not married to him.

"Okay. Let's get married today!"

All day, Dorothy and Carter both had huge, silly grins on their

faces. When they saw Micah going into the parsonage by himself, Carter took a chance.

"Pastor, there's a time-sensitive matter I could use your assistance with."

"Yes?"

Carter explained their predicament to Micah.

Micah's eyes widened. "I'm so happy for you two. I would love to marry you. But are you sure you want to get married *today*? I'm worried Edna Petunia will hold this against me."

Dorothy was torn.

Carter placed his hand in the small of Dorothy's back, and she felt her insides go aflutter with tingles and sensations.

"We're sure." Dorothy smiled at the man who would be her husband in a few hours. She knew she was making the right decision.

\* \* \*

DOROTHY FELT like a spy all morning, because she didn't let any of her sisters, parents, or friends know what she and Carter planned to do that afternoon. Slowly but surely, everything fell into place. Dorothy felt it was a sign that she was meant to marry Carter.

She picked blue flowers with Chrissy and saved one to carry as a bouquet. Sarah Jane asked her to go into the parsonage and get a book out of a specific room and closet. In the closet, she found the most stunning white dress. She planned to come back just before they were to be married to slip the dress on. Finally, she cut little slices of Edna Petunia's famous chocolate cake.

All day, Dorothy's sisters kept asking her about Carter and her wedding plans. It was nearly impossible to keep her secret, but she knew she had to. If anyone caught wind of their plans, they'd certainly put a stop to the entire thing. Everyone knew that Edna Petunia had her heart set on planning a wedding—they all knew she was going to find a way to do it, one way or another.

"Where will you live?" Theresa, ever practical and blunt, wanted to know.

"You two should stay with us, at least until the baby comes or until you find a house that works for both of you. Our house is huge, and we would love the extra help around the house." Penny had already discussed her idea with Tom, and he was in agreement.

"Will you still work for Mr. Reeves?"

Dorothy had to admit she wasn't sure.

"How many children do you want?"

Dorothy laughed. She had been engaged for less than a day. She

needed a little time to adjust!

Just before lunch, Micah called together everyone to do a blessing. "I'd like to thank God for this blessed bounty, and also for our wonderful community here in Nowhere. We thank Him for our many blessings, our children, our loved ones, and our neighbors. Amen."

Everyone nodded and murmured in agreement. "Amen."

"Today, we have a new neighbor with us, Mr. Carter Reeves. I hope you all will show him the wonderful kindness and respect you have shown to me and my family."

While everyone else lined up for Edna Petunia's fried chicken, potato salad, cakes, and other delicacies, Dorothy crept back into the parsonage and located the white dress. She changed into it and picked up her bouquet of flowers. She slipped outside and tried to stay out of eyesight.

Carter saw Dorothy's white dress and felt a jolt course through his veins. He'd never had the type of physical reaction he had to Dorothy with another woman. He walked up to her, took her hand in his, and whispered in her ear. "You look incredible."

Dorothy could barely think or talk. All she could think about was the way Carter was touching her, and all the other things that would be possible once they were married. "Thank you."

Micah announced that he wanted anyone related to the Sanders family to meet him by the side of the parsonage, away from the crowds of people who were getting their lunch or eating. Soon, Dorothy's sisters, brothers-in-law, and children were forming a curious crowd around the pastor. Edna Petunia and Cletus were the last to make their way over.

"I wasn't done eating cake!" Robert complained.

"What's all this about, anyway?" Edna Petunia demanded of Micah.

Micah took a deep breath. "We are gathered here to witness a very happy occasion. Carter Reeves and Dorothy Sanders wish to be married today in your presence."

The family's chattering and grumbling stopped immediately.

"They wish *what*?" Edna Petunia screeched in Cletus's ear. He rubbed it for a moment, then continued to listen to Micah.

"On this day, before God and man, we will join these two in holy matrimony. Carter Reeves, do you take Dorothy Sanders to be your lawfully-wedded wife?"

Carter stared into Dorothy's eyes. "I do."

"Dorothy Sanders, do you take Carter Reeves to be your lawfully-wedded husband?"

Dorothy saw that Carter's eyes were shining. "I do."

"I now pronounce you man and wife. You may kiss the bride."

“Nooooo!” With a huge cry, Edna Petunia leapt to the front of the crowd and stood next to Dorothy. Micah froze. He was unsure what to do next. “I just needed a little more time!” Edna Petunia looked longingly at Dorothy’s hair. Dorothy took her adoptive mother’s hand and squeezed it tightly.

Cletus strode next to his wife and put a gentle hand on her shoulder. He guided her away. “There, there. I’m sure you’ll get to plan a wedding soon, dear.”

Micah cleared his throat. “You may *now* kiss the bride.”

Carter put one hand on Dorothy’s back and another around her shoulders, pressing his lips into hers over and over again. Dorothy kissed back, amazed that she was now Mrs. Carter Reeves.

“You may now go forth as husband and wife. May God bless you.”

The extended Sanders family began to cheer loudly. They surrounded the newlyweds, hugging them and breaking into happy tears.

When things began to calm down, Carter nudged Dorothy quietly. “I know a few things we could do now that we’re married.”

“And what would those things be?”

Carter whispered in her ear, and Dorothy’s eyes widened. Carter laughed at her expression. “I’m not saying we need to do that today. But I want you to know that I’m thinking about it.” Dorothy blushed deep red. She was going to have to get used to being someone’s wife. It was a totally new experience for her.

“Oh, I almost forgot! These are family rings, passed down for a few generations. I’d be honored if you’d like to wear one.”

Carter pulled two rings from his pocket. One was delicate and tiny. It had a dainty sapphire stone set against a band, while the other was a plain gold band. Carter slipped the gold band onto his ring finger and helped Dorothy slide the sapphire onto her finger.

“It’s beautiful. Absolutely beautiful.”

“Now it feels official.”

“Yes, it does.”

“Shall we face Edna Petunia?”

Dorothy gulped. She supposed it was as good a time as any. “Sure.”

As difficult as it was, she knew she needed to make peace with her parents. She changed back into the clothes she’d arrived in and returned the dress to the parsonage. She went outside to find the older couple.

“Edna Petunia, Cletus, can you come with me for a moment?”

Cletus looked expectantly at Edna Petunia. “Will you promise to behave yourself?”

Edna Petunia sighed loudly. “All right, fine. Out with it.”

“I’m very sorry we didn’t tell you in advance, but Carter and I

couldn't wait any longer." Dorothy's words came spilling out in a blur.

"We love each other very much, and we wanted to become a family as soon as possible." Carter helped explain.

The look on Edna Petunia's face made it seem like Dorothy had told them that someone had died. "But why wouldn't you tell me?"

Dorothy took a deep breath. "We realized that we've been apart for far too long, and we couldn't wait another evening before we spent it as man and wife."

"Well, we of all people can certainly understand *that*, now can't we, Edna Petunia." Cletus made eyes at his wife, and she smacked his arm.

"You're missing the point, Cletus! One of my bastards denied me the chance to plan her wedding when she knows that's all I've ever wanted. Do you know how that feels, to be betrayed by your own flesh and blood?"

"Well, technically, not flesh and blood—" Carter cut himself off, realizing that it was not the time to pick that particular battle.

"Edna Petunia, Cletus, you've been the best parents a girl could ask for. I'm so grateful to have you in my life, in *our* lives. But now it's time for me to move out and make my own decisions. And listening to you talk about all the things you were going to do made me realize that for me, it wasn't about the wedding. It was just Carter. And now that I have him, he's all that I need."

Edna Petunia frowned and gave Dorothy a big bear hug. "We love you, Dorothy. It's going to take me some time to get over this. Not again—"

Cletus winked at the newlyweds. "We'll sort this out, I'm sure. I'm happy for you two, and very happy you'll be staying in Nowhere."

"Thank you for understanding, Cletus." Dorothy was grateful that at least he was trying.

Dorothy smiled. She was not going to let anyone or anything bring her down today. It was the happiest day of her life.

"I'm so happy for you two! Wow, that might be a record for fastest courtship, right?" Sarah Jane flung her arms around the newlyweds.

"Please, please come live with Tom and me," Penny begged.

Dorothy laughed. "My husband and I will think on it, and get back to you." When she said 'husband,' Carter slid his arm around her waist. She loved the way his touch affected her entire body.

"Why isn't anyone playing?" Robert, one of Ruby and Lewis's sons, came up to the group of adults congregated around Dorothy and Carter.

"We're celebrating some very exciting news!" Ruby rubbed his shoulders. "Aunt Dorothy and Carter just got married!"

"Okay." Robert didn't seem impressed. "Are you going to have a

baby now, too?"

Dorothy and Carter both laughed.

"Hopefully one day."

Robert had already run back to play with the rest of the kids.

Carter took Dorothy's hand and squeezed it. The most important thing was that they were together. And together was exactly where they were meant to be.

## Epilogue

Six months later, Carter helped Dorothy into her overcoat. He slipped on his own coat, then grabbed Dorothy's arm as she gently stepped outside.

Dorothy stared at the light layer of frost surrounding her. "Isn't it absolutely gorgeous?" Texas winters weren't anything like the winters in New York she had grown up with, but they were magical in their own way. Dorothy loved watching the changes in the temperature and the agriculture.

Carter smiled. He never tired of seeing how nature could provide so much delight for his wife. He didn't always see things the same way she did, but he loved the way she viewed the world.

"It's very nice."

"I'm nearly finished with my Christmas gifts— I hope I've picked the right thing for your parents. I can't believe this will be my first time meeting them!"

"They're going to love you."

"I sure hope so."

"And I'm working with Gertrude to order books for each of the boys. I want each of them to have their own book, so they have one thing they don't have to share."

Carter smiled. He loved how considerate his wife was. Watching him with Penny and Tom's boys made him realize what a wonderful mother she was going to be.

Dorothy began walking further out, and Carter grabbed her arm again.

"Easy there—we don't want to take any chances."

Dorothy smiled. Carter was already such a loving and protective father, and the baby wasn't even due for three more months.

They were still living with Penny and Tom until their house was finished. Cletus had found them a nice parcel of land that had been abandoned, and construction would begin in the spring.

As predicted, Penny had given birth to a boy. Tom was sure she'd give birth to six more, but Penny said she was planning to take them



all one at a time.

At first Dorothy had worried about a lack of privacy by moving in with her sister, her brother-in-law, and their eighteen boys. After a while, though, everyone settled into their new routines and it was completely comfortable to live at the McClain Ranch with the whole clan. Dorothy found that she enjoyed being so close to the newborn baby. She was able to practice caring for her new nephew so she wouldn't be inexperienced when her own time came. She also enjoyed seeing how the older boys were with the infant. Many of them were sweet and took time to sing or rock their little brother. Others helped feed him bottles or change him when needed. Overall, they were a great lot of boys, and Dorothy was pleased to get to know them better.

Since the house was so big, it was easy to find alone time with Carter, and they made time for each other on a regular basis. At first, they were both nervous and formal with each other, but soon, they had learned to relax and let go. About a month after the wedding, Dorothy had started to feel exhausted and sick to her stomach. Penny had laughed and immediately taken her to Dr. Iris Harvey, the town doctor.

"I'm sure I know what's wrong with you." Penny had promised Dorothy.

Sure enough, Dorothy was pregnant. She had no idea how it had happened so quickly, but she was thrilled to take this new step with Carter. He read to the baby every night from one of his books and always helped her around the house.

Dorothy had always dreamed of being a wife and a mother, and it was finally happening. She couldn't wait for the day she, Carter, and the new baby would move into their new house. It was being built in the middle of the woods where they could see trees and fields and animals, and plant wildflowers and vegetables or anything else they wanted.

Dorothy and Carter went inside the house, and Carter lit some logs in the fireplace. He took Dorothy's arm at the elbow and helped guide her down into one of the chairs. Her belly had grown rapidly the past few weeks, and she was struggling to keep her balance most of the time. Fortunately, Carter was there to catch her. As the fireplace began to roar, Dorothy looked at Carter and took his hands into hers.

"I'm so glad you're out here with me."

"There isn't anywhere in the world I'd rather be."

## About the Author

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